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The theological dialectic of creation and death in Hebrew Bible wisdom traditions

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CHAPTER 4

QOHELET 11:7-12:8: DEATH AS IMPETUS FOR LIFE

Characterising Qohelet¹¹⁴⁵ as *ein Buch mit Stacheln* is very fitting.¹¹⁴⁶ Qohelet's relentless questioning,¹¹⁴⁷ combined with the elusive and at times ambiguous nature of its argumentation often leaves readers perplexed. While established as part of the HB wisdom tradition, the nature of its content remains debatable.¹¹⁴⁸ Indeed, the diverseness of Qohelet within the HB presents a problem for biblical theology.¹¹⁴⁹ Not surprisingly, a diversity of interpretations results from the book's complex and enigmatic character,¹¹⁵⁰ calling for an awareness of exegetical presuppositions and hermeneutical frameworks. In the broader discipline of biblical theology the book of Qohelet confronts the reader with existential questions, testing the boundaries of theological paradigms. The primary concern in this chapter is the creation-death relation as it takes shape in Qoh 11:7-12:8.

Firstly the delimitation of the text will be considered (§4.1), followed by a consideration of its structure (§4.2). A translation will be offered (§4.3), setting the stage for an analysis of the text (§5.4), which in turn provides the background for the thematic discussion (§4.5). Concluding remarks (§4.6) will bring the chapter to a

¹¹⁴⁵ Here Qohelet (**tlhq**) is used instead of *Ecclesiastes*, as derived from the the LXX (**ekklhsiasthv**). See W.C. Delsman, *Die Datierung des Buches Qoheleth: Eine sprachwissenschaftliche Analyse* (Nijmegen: Nijmegen University Press, 2000), 14-23 for a discussion of the designation **tlhq**.

¹¹⁴⁶ W. Zimmerli, "Unveränderbare Welt oder Gott ist Gott? Ein Plädoyer für die Unaufgebbbarkeit des Predigerbuches in der Bibel," in: H.G. Geyer et al., *Wenn nicht jetzt, wann dann? Aufsätze für Hans-Joachim Kraus zum 65. Geburtstag* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1983), 103. The double redactional epilogue of 12:9-11 and 12-14 indicates an early recognition of its "thorny" character. But this does not imply that all positive sayings in Qohelet should be ascribed to an orthodox redactor. Cf. J.A. Dearman, *Religion and Culture in Ancient Israel* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrikson, 1992), 219.

¹¹⁴⁷ Qohelet can be characterised as a "seeker," i.e. searching for meaning in this life within a divinely created reality. Cf. E. Noort, "Theologie in het boek Kohelet. De verhouding van dood en leven als kritische vraag aan de traditionele wijsheidsliteratuur," in: J. Ridderbos (ed.), *Mens, durf te leven! Prediker: een postmodern denker uit de derde eeuw voor Christus* (Kampen: Kok, 1996), 107.

¹¹⁴⁸ C.J. Labuschagne, "Het Godsbeeld in Prediker," in: J. Ridderbos (red.), *Mens, durf te leven! Prediker: een postmodern denker uit de derde eeuw voor Christus* (Kampen: Kok, 1996), 70 argues that the "I character" in Qohelet is a philosopher rather than a theologian. But the frequent references to God in Qohelet make its theological interest unmistakable.

¹¹⁴⁹ W.H.U. Anderson, *Qohelet and His Pessimistic Theology. Hermeneutical Struggles in Wisdom Literature* (Lewiston: Mellen Biblical Press, 1997), 204. In particular the genre wisdom literature. Unity in terms of theme and perspective is difficult to substantiate in view of instances often regarded as editorial glosses (e.g. 3:17; 7:18; 8:12-13; 11:9b) meant to re-establish traditional views of retribution (12:9-14). Cf. Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom*, 132.

¹¹⁵⁰ C.G. Bartholomew, *Reading Ecclesiastes: Old Testament Exegesis and Hermeneutical Theory* (Rome: Pontificio Instituto Biblico, 1998) identifies some continuity in approaches to the book of Qohelet in pre-critical, modern or post-modern modes of interpretation. Also R.E. Murphy, "Qohelet Interpreted: The Bearing of the Past on the Present." *VT* 32 (1982): 331. He points to "a remarkable homogeneity" concerning Qohelet's interpretation, resulting from "clearly defined presuppositions or directions of exegesis." Also E. Bons, "Das Buch Kohelet in jüdischer und christlicher Interpretation," in: L. Schwienhorst-Schönberger et al., *Das Buch Kohelet: Studien zur Struktur, Geschichte, Rezeption und Theologie* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1997), 327-361; L. Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kohelet: Stand und Perspektiven der Forschung*, 5-38; O. Kaiser, "Beiträge zur Kohelet-Forschung: Eine Nachlese." *TRu* 60 (1995): 1-31, 233-253.

close. This chapter attempts a text-immanent reading in order to gain better insight into the character of the creation-death relation in Qoh 11:7-12:8, within the parameters of the wisdom and worldview operative in Qohelet. This question is particularly relevant in the case of Qohelet, since the concern with death outweighs all other themes in the book.¹¹⁵¹

4.1 Delimitation of the Text

Qohelet 11:7-12:8 constitutes a literary unit, and simultaneously the closing poem to the book as a whole.¹¹⁵² While this view is not unanimously shared,¹¹⁵³ it is maintained in this study. Difference of opinion also concerns the extent and structure of this literary unit.¹¹⁵⁴ Here we will consider Qoh 11:7-12:8 as a literary unit, distinct from 11:1-6 and 12:9-14. Formal criteria for this decision will be considered first, and thereafter the thematic grounds. First we will consider the relation of Qoh 11:7-12:8 with 11:1-6 and thereafter its relation to the double epilogue of 12:9-14, which is widely reckoned as stemming from a later redactional hand as a means of taming the otherwise radical voice of Qohelet. The primary formal reason for distinguishing Qoh 11:7-12:8 from 11:1-6 concerns the use of the particle **w(qtm)** in 11:7a. While the **w** would normally be translated in a connecting or adversative sense, it is here considered to function in a different sense. It introduces a new line of reasoning in

¹¹⁵¹ M.V. Fox, *Qohelet and his Contradictions* (JSOTSup 71; Decatur, Ga.: The Almond Press, 1989), 294. Qohelet “reveals an obsession with death unparalleled in biblical literature.” Also Noort, *Theologie in het boek Kohelet*, 88-108.

¹¹⁵² J.L. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes* (OTL; London: SCM Press, 1988), 181ff; M.V. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up: A Rereading of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1999), 315ff; R. Gordis, *Kohelet: the Man and his World* (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1951), 323ff; N. Kamano, *Cosmology and Character: Qohelet's Pedagogy from a Rhetorical-Critical Perspective* (BZAW 312; Berlin, New York: de Gruyter, 2002), 219ff; C. Klein, *Kohelet und die Weisheit Israels: Ein formgeschichtliche Studie* (BWANT 7; Stuttgart: Verlag W Kohlhammer, 1994), 150; J.A. Loader, *Polar Structures in the Book of Qohelet* (BZAW 152; Berlin: De Gruyter, 1979), 107ff; T. Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1998), 263ff; C.L. Seow, *Ecclesiastes* (AB; New York: Doubleday, 1997), 347ff; R.E. Murphy, *Ecclesiastes* (WBC; Dallas, Tex.: Word, 1992), 111f.

¹¹⁵³ D.C. Fredericks, “Life's Storms and Structural Unity in Qohelet 11:1-12:8.” *JSOT* 52 (1991): 95-114 regards Qoh 11:1-12:8 as a literary or structural unit, given the tie between 11:1-6 and 11:7-12:8. Perdue, *Wisdom and Creation*, 230ff discusses 9:11-11:8 and 11:9-12:8 as two units. N. Lohfink, *Kohelet* (NEBAT 1; Würzburg: Echter, 1980), 81ff regards 11:9-12:7 as the *Schlußgedicht*. T. Krüger, *Kohelet* (BKAT 19; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchen Verlag, 2000), 19-20 regards 11:1-12:7 as unit. He argues that the themes of *Tod und Freude* encountered in 9:1-12 are taken up in reversed order in 11:1-12:7. D. Michel, *Qohelet* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1988), 166ff sees 11:9-12:7 as unit. Also W. Zimmerli, *Prediger*, in: H. Ringgren and W. Zimmerli, *Sprüche / Prediger* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1980), 238ff. H.W. Hertzberg, *Der Prediger* (Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1963), 204ff regards 11:9-12:8 as a unit, since the **wat** at the beginning of 11:7 indicates that it belongs to the preceding unit. R.N. Whybray, *Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1989), 161 regards 11:7-8 as stylistically different and constituting a separate unit, though it is thematically the same as 11:9-12:7.

¹¹⁵⁴ G.S. Ogdon, “Qohelet XI 7- XII 8: Qohelet's Summons to Enjoyment and Reflection.” *VT* 34 (1984): views Qohelet 11:7-12:8 as a literary unit, though 11:1-6 should not be seen as entirely separate from 11:7-8, since the references to ‘light’, ‘darkness’ and ‘sun’ could have some link with the natural phenomenon mentioned in 11:1-6. For Ogdon, the two themes of 11:7-8 are further developed in the rest of the pericope (structural phenomenon of paired sentences in parallel form. Thus the two verbs **jmc** and **rlkz** establish the two themes of this pericope). Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, 263 regards Qoh 12:1-7 as subunit of 11:7-12:7. Qoh 11:7-10 begins the transition into the last topic of the book, that of old age and death. Qoh 11:9-10 forshadow something terrible about to happen.

Qohelet's argumentation (cf. 3:16; 4:4; 8:10; 12:1, 9 for comparable uses of the **w**).¹¹⁵⁵ If the **w** is read as a connecting particle "and," then the relation of the material of 11:1-6 with that of 11:7-12:8 is unclear.¹¹⁵⁶ Thematic linkages concern the reference to the clouds (**pyb**) in 11:3 and 4, though the context in which it is used differs from that of 12:2. In 11:4 **jw** is used as a mere reference to "wind," while the use of **jw** in 11:5 is in closer proximity to that of 12:7, where the **jw** is related to the creator God (**pyhlah**). In this way Qoh 11:5 provides a thematic linkage with 11:7-12:8 (12:1, 7). But the important issue in 11:5, namely the unknowable nature (**[dt al]**) of the works (**hc[n]**) of God, is not a theme in 11:7-12:8. Thus, considering the function of the **w** as introducing a new line of reasoning as well as the lack of any real correspondence of theme between 11:1-6 and 11:7-12:8, the decision to read 11:7-12:8 as distinct from 11:1-6 is tenable.

In considering the relation between 11:7-12:8 and 12:9-14, similar criteria may be employed. The particle **w(rtyw)** in 12:9 also has a separating rather than a connecting function. Here a later redactor is at work, since these six verses are much more in line with the more traditional proverbial wisdom, and contrast with the general reasoning of Qohelet. The only thematic linkage between 11:7-12:8 and 12:9-12:14 concerns the use of **fpvmin** 12:4. But as we will argue in the analysis of the text, the use of **fpvmin** 11:9 seems rather out of place, suggesting redactional labour. Therefore the lack of clear formal and thematic correspondences supports the distinction of 11:7-12:8 from 12:9-14. The position of 12:8 should also be considered. It is mostly regarded as forming an inclusio with 1:2, providing a frame to the book as a whole by means of the recurring **lbh** theme.¹¹⁵⁷ However, 12:8 also presents a fitting end to 11:7-12:7, for which reason 11:7-12:8 may be read as literary unit. This point is further explicated in the analysis of the text.

4.2 The Structure of the Text

In this section we will consider the internal structure and cohesion of Qoh 11:7-12:8. The material of this literary unit is best characterised as "artistic prose" rather than poetry.¹¹⁵⁸

As a literary unit, Qoh 11:7-12:8 consists of two literary sub-units, namely 11:7-10 and 12:1-8. Each has its own leading motif, namely *carpe diem* (**jnc**) in 11:7-10 (A), and *memento mori* (**rkz**) in 12:1-8 (B).¹¹⁵⁹ In considering the coherence of 11:7-12:8,

¹¹⁵⁵ Cf. A. Schoors, *The Preacher Sought to Find Pleasing Words: A Study of the Language of Qohelet* (OLA 41; Leuven: Peeters, 1992), 206 (also 128) for this use of the **w** in Qohelet. Here in agreement with Gordis, *Koheleth*, 324; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 346-347; Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 161. In contrast Krüger, *Kohelet*, 345 regards 11:1-6 as connected to 11:7-12:7 by means of the **w** as a connecting particle.

¹¹⁵⁶ Klein, *Kohelet und die Weisheit Israels*, 150 argues that 11:7 has no connection in terms of form or content with the preceding context, and introduces the last literary unit of the book.

¹¹⁵⁷ The wording and structure of these two framing verses, namely 1:2 and 12:8 are not exactly the same and particularly noticeable is the addition of the definite article **h** before **tlhq** in 12:8, suggesting that the name Qohelet is changed to a title. In 7:27 the text-critical notes also suggests a reading **tlhqh**.

¹¹⁵⁸ Alonso Schökel, *A Manual of Hebrew Poetics*, 19.

¹¹⁵⁹ Fox, *Qoheleth and his Contradictions*, 277.

it is significant to note that nearly all the lexemes of 11:7-8 reoccur in 11:9-12:8,¹¹⁶⁰ which points to an internal thematic linkage in 11:7-12:8. By means of the two sub-literary units, a tension is created within the larger literary unit of 11:7-12:8. This tension concerns the enjoyment of life (**jnc**) and the remembrance that life is finite and will inevitably come to an absolute end (**rkz**). At this point we should consider the position of 12:1a. By means of the particle **w** and the imperative **rkz**, a new line of thought is introduced in the argumentation of Qohelet. At the same time 12:a connects 11:7-10 and 12:1b thematically.¹¹⁶¹ Qoh 12:1b, commencing with **al rva d[**, has the function of introducing a series of temporal clauses describing aging and death, which serve to bring out the urgency of the instruction given in 11:7-10.

The first literary sub-unit, Qoh 11:7-10, can further be divided in 11:7-8 and 9-10. While verse 7 (**qwm**) and 9 (**jnc**) commence on a positive note, verse 8 and 10 close with **lbh**. In this way the tension of the larger literary unit is also present in this sub-unit. Further, in 11:8-9 it is evident that in v 8 **jnc** stands opposed to **lbh**, and in v 9 **jnc** stands opposed to **fpvm**. While the theme of creation as such is not immediately present in 11:7-10, a tension is created by means of contrasting the motif of joy (**jnc**) with that of vanity (**lbh**).

A different scenario is encountered in the second literary sub-unit (12:1-8). Qoh 12:1b introduces a series of temporal clauses by means of **al rva d[**.¹¹⁶² In 12:2 (**al rva d[**), 3 (**pyb**)¹¹⁶³ and 6 (**al rva d[**) the temporal clauses are followed by pronouncements. The “days of your youth” (**ûtryjb ymb**) in 12:1a are opposed with the “evil days” (**h[rh ym**) in 12:1b. However, such an internal verse tension is not encountered again in 12:2-8. Qoh 12:2-6 functions as an elaboration on the “evil days” (**h[rh ym**) introduced in 12:1b (cf. §5.4). In terms of theme 12:7 is related to the broader theme of 12:2-6,¹¹⁶⁴ but not in terms of form, seeing the lack of a temporal clause. Similarly 12:8 has no formal connection with 12:2-6, but in terms of the **lbh** theme does present a fitting conclusion to 11:7-12:7. While 11:7-10 contains both a positive and a negative motif, the positive motif (**hmc**) is lacking in 12:1-8.¹¹⁶⁵ For in 12:1-8 the *memento mori* (**rkz**) motif is intensified by the means of the **lbh** theme.¹¹⁶⁶

¹¹⁶⁰ Cf. **rva** 12:2; **bvf** 11:9; **y[** 11:9; **har** 11:9, 12:3; **vuv** 12:2; **pyv** 12:1; **pda** 12:5; **jnc** 11:9; **rkz** 12:1; **ym** 11:9, 12:1; **ûvj** 12:2, 3; **lbh** 11:10, 12:8, 12:6, **lbj**. Cf. L. Schwienhorst-Schönberger, “Nicht im Menschen gründet das Glück”: *Kohelet im Spannungsfeld jüdischer Weisheit und hellenistischer Philosophie*. (2d ed.; HBS 2; Freiburg: Herder, 1996), 224-225. He considers 11:9-12:8 as pre-announced by 11:7-8.

¹¹⁶¹ Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 316.

¹¹⁶² R.N. Whybray, “Qohelet, Preacher of Joy.” *JSOT* 23 (1982): 91 considers the series of subordinate clauses introduced by **al rva d[** in 12:1b-12:7 as dependant on the imperative clause in 12:1a “Remember your creator in the days of your youth.” These motif clauses have also been interpreted as three reasons for urgency. Cf. J.F.A. Sawyer, “Ruined House in Ecclesiastes 12: A Reconstruction of the Original Parable.” *JBL* 94 (1975): 519-531 at 522.

¹¹⁶³ This is characterised by Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 115 as “somewhat parenthetical.”

¹¹⁶⁴ J.A. Loader, *Ecclesiastes: A Practical Commentary* (TI; trans. J. Vriend; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1986), 129 argues for the positive and negative motif in 12:1-8, indicated by a threefold repetition, namely 12:1b-2; 3-5; 6-7. Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 114 also points to the importance of repetition within 12:1-6. Particularly the three word-pairs **sk** and **bh** (silver and gold); **hlg** and **dk** (bowl and pulley); **vbm** and **rvb** (fountain and cistern). These word pairs have a unifying function.

¹¹⁶⁵ Loader, *Polar Structures*, 111. He suggests that the author makes use of the technique of contrast in units 11:7-10, 12:1-5 and 12:6-8, with **jnc** not merely presenting an antithesis of **lbh**, but is rather viewed as a consequence of it. The one gives rise to the other. A slightly different view is offered by

Further, 11:7 states the value of human life while 11:8 emphasises the value of a long life; 11:9-12:1a constitute an exhortation directed to youth, while 12:1b-7 underlie this exhortation by means of describing the bad days that are to come; 12:8 brings the literary unit to a close, and also serves as a reiteration of the book's theme.¹¹⁶⁷

4.3 Translation of Qohelet 11:7-12:8

In this section a translation of Qoh 11:7-12:8 is offered. The language concerning the deterioration of life and eventual death entails some difficulties.¹¹⁶⁸ This is not as result of extensive corruption in the text, but rather from ignorance concerning the precise nuances of the terminology Qohelet employs in his reasoning.¹¹⁶⁹ This coincides with the uncertainty concerning the socio-historical context (§ 4.5.1) in which the language of Qohelet¹¹⁷⁰ should be located.¹¹⁷¹ Thus, attention is required for considering *what* words mean, but also *how* they are used within a specific context.¹¹⁷² Translating Qohelet 11:7-12:8 is an attempt to penetrate the thought world of an enigmatic writer.¹¹⁷³

Kamano, *Cosmology and Character*, 220-21 suggesting that the contrast of life and death does not constitute two distinct groups of exhortations, structured round **jmc** and **rkz**, but rather a single set of exhortations “whose framework is set by the keywords ‘to enjoy’ and ‘to remember.’”

¹¹⁶⁶ Loader, *Ecclesiastes*, 129. Concerning this tension Schwienhorst-Schönberger, “*Nicht im Menschen gründet das Glück*,” 224-226 reads 12:1-8 in view of 11:7-10 and argues “Formal ist es ein Aufruf zur Freude, inhaltlich über weite Strecken aber eine Beschreibung von Alter, Krankheit und Tod.” He regards this last literary unit as the closing call to joy, with 11:9-12:8 pre-announced by 11:7-8. Also Loader, *Ecclesiastes*, 130. But the precise nuance of the imagery remains illusive. Cf. Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 114.

¹¹⁶⁷ Krüger, *Kohelet*, 195.

¹¹⁶⁸ Goldingay, “Life and Death in the Psalms,” 65.

¹¹⁶⁹ Murphy, *The Tree of Life*, 50. Also R.E. Murphy, “On Translating Ecclesiastes.” *CBQ* 53 (1991): 571-79. He observes that the text of Qohelet has been transmitted “fairly exactly” and that we have quite a “sound” text. But difficulties in translation are ample, and are often the result of prior decisions regarding the message and style of Qohelet. Also Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 333. How Qohelet employs generally known knowledge or puts it to poetical use is unclear.

¹¹⁷⁰ A. Schoors, *The Preacher Sought to find Pleasant Words: A Study of the Language of Qoheleth* (OLA 41; Leuven: Peeters, 1992), 1-15 considers various theories regarding Qohelet's language. Also Delsman, *Die Datierung* who dates it to the latter part of the 3rd century BCE.

¹¹⁷¹ O. Loretz, *Qohelet und der Alte Orient: Untersuchungen zu Stil und theologischer Thematik des Buches Qohelet* (Freiburg: Herder, 1964) considers Greek, Egyptian or Mesopotamian influences. Also D. Michel, *Qohelet* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1988), 52-65 who considers various influences on the nature ideas in Qohelet. He favours Hellenistic influence.

¹¹⁷² A. Schoors, “The (Mis)use of Intertextuality in Qohelet Exegesis,” in: A. Lemaire and M. Saebo (eds.), *Congress Volume, Oslo 1998* (VTSup 80; Leiden: Brill, 2000), 45-59 argues, in reference to Qohelet, that a text or a phrase or a motif that has been borrowed receives its full meaning only from the actual context in which it has been adopted. He does emphasise the importance of trying to follow the trajectory of a borrowed text, from the source text to the final text.

¹¹⁷³ Emendations of the MT to explain difficult words or *hapax legomena* are not always fruitful, nor wishful. Individual words should rather be viewed as part of conceptual or thought units, and meaning should be sought in these thought units, rather than individual words.

A

- 11:7 a Sweet is the light,¹¹⁷⁴
 b and it is good for the eyes to see the sun.
 11:8 a For if a man should live many years, let him rejoice in them all,
 b and remember that the days of darkness will be many;
 c all that comes is vanity.
 11:9 a Rejoice¹¹⁷⁵ young man in¹¹⁷⁶ your youth,¹¹⁷⁷
 b and let your heart cheer you¹¹⁷⁸ in the days of your prime;
 c and follow the ways of your heart¹¹⁷⁹
 d and the sights¹¹⁸⁰ of your eyes,¹¹⁸¹
 e but know that for all this
 f God will bring you to judgment.
 11:10 a Remove trouble from your heart,
 b and remove unpleasantness from your flesh,
 c for childhood and youth¹¹⁸² are vanity.

B

- 12:1 a Remember your creator¹¹⁸³ in the days of your youth,¹¹⁸⁴
 b before the days of unpleasantness come and years arrive
 c of which you will say,
 d “I have no pleasure in them;”
 12:2 a before the sun darkens, and the light,¹¹⁸⁵
 b and the moon and the stars,
 c and the clouds return after the rain;
 12:3 a in the day when¹¹⁸⁶ the keepers of the house¹¹⁸⁷ tremble,

¹¹⁷⁴ The **w** is not considered as connecting particle and is not translated. In case of a translation, “moreover” is more fitting than “and.” The LXX reads **kai**; but is lacking in the Peshitta.

¹¹⁷⁵ This is the only imperative of **jnc** in this literary unit and is combined with **ryjb** to address an audience.

¹¹⁷⁶ The preposition **b** can be read as temporal, i.e. “while you are young,” but also as reference to the object of enjoyment, i.e. “in your youth.” We translate “in your youth,” given the parallelism with **ûtwryjb ynb** “in the days of your youth.” Cf. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 349. The suggestion of Gordis, *Koheleth*, 325 “in the time of your youth” offers a good compromise.

¹¹⁷⁷ The form of **ôyt, wlyjb** (**ôt, wlyjb** in some manuscripts) is uncertain, and the abstract term **twly** (“childhood, youth”) occurs only in Qoh 11:9, 10 and Ps 110:3.

¹¹⁷⁸ In 11:9b **ôbfy** “let it cheer you” can be read as a Hi impf. of **bvf** or **bfy**. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 349 does not favour an emendation in order to read a Qal impf. **bfy**. Here as in Qoh 2:1-3 **bl** may be read as the personified, active subject, substantiating a translation “let your heart cheer you.”

¹¹⁷⁹ Some LXX manuscripts read **αμωμο**, i.e. “blameless,” thus qualifying the imperative, and counter any notion of hedonism. In the MT a tension remains.

¹¹⁸⁰ For the plural form **yach** (“sights”) the LXX, Peshitta and Vulgate reads a singular.

¹¹⁸¹ The LXX reads **kai; nh ejn ofasei ofqal mwn sou**, “and not in the sight of your eyes.” Some Hebrew manuscripts read **harnbw** instead of **yarnbw**.

¹¹⁸² The translation of the hapax **twjv** (“blackness, dawn”) is unclear. It can refer to “dark hair” (from **rjv**, “black”) or the “prime of youth” (from **rjv**, i.e. “dawn”). Both imply youthfulness.

¹¹⁸³ Some manuscripts read a singular, offering a correction of the text. Cf. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 351. For Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 321 the **yof B[rôya]** is not an error, but rather a fuller representation of the segol. As such it is unnecessary to emend the text.

¹¹⁸⁴ Here **ûtryjb** can also be translated “in your prime,” referring to the prime of life, which entails more than just youthfulness.

¹¹⁸⁵ Gordis, *Koheleth*, 132 points out that the Peshitta reads **jryhwrwaw** hendiadys, differing from the MT and LXX.

¹¹⁸⁶ For **v pyb** the LXX reads **ejn hñera** and the Vulgate *quando*, i.e. “when.”

- b and the strong men convulse,
 c and the grinders cease¹¹⁸⁸ because they are few,
 d and those looking through the windows grow dim;
 12:4 a and the doors in the street¹¹⁸⁹ are shut,¹¹⁹⁰
 b and the sound of the mill becomes low,
 c and the sound of the bird rises,
 d and the daughters of song come down low;
 12:5 a and from on high they see¹¹⁹¹ terror on the way
 b but the almond tree blossoms,
 c and the locust becomes laden,
 d and the caper berry¹¹⁹² buds,¹¹⁹³
 e for man is going to his eternal home,
 f and the mourners walk about in the street.
 12:6 a Before the silver cord is snapped,¹¹⁹⁴
 b and the golden bowl is crushed,¹¹⁹⁵
 c and the jar is broken at the spring,
 d and the wheel is smashed at the well;
 12:7 a And dust returns to the earth as it was,
 b and the spirit returns to God who gave it
 12:8 a Vanity¹¹⁹⁶ of vanities, says Qohelet,¹¹⁹⁷
 b all is vanity.

4.4 An Analysis of Qoh 11:7-12:8

Qohelet 11:7-12:8 is indeed a text filled with exegetical problems of all sorts.¹¹⁹⁸ The range of exegetical difficulties and its importance for gaining a better understanding

¹¹⁸⁷ The LXX reads **fulake" th" oikia**", "guards of the house."

¹¹⁸⁸ In the HB **lfb** "stop" is a hapax, but also occurs in Aramaic in Ezra 4:21, 23, 24 and 5:5 with the meaning "to stop, be discontinued." It is also attested in postbiblical Hebrew with the meaning "to cease altogether" or "to suspend activity." Cf. Gordis, *Koheleth*, 332. He regards **lfb** as an Aramaism.

¹¹⁸⁹ The LXX reads **ej agora**"in the market-place."

¹¹⁹⁰ The LXX reads the active **kleisousin**, while the MT (Pu of **rgs**) and Peshitta reads a passive form. Cf. Gordis, *Koheleth*, 333.

¹¹⁹¹ Here we follow the LXX that reads **ofaw** "to see," suggesting that the form **wry** is from **har** instead of **ary**. The MT is supported by the Vulgate, reading *timebunt*.

¹¹⁹² The LXX reads η επιτονο~ "caperberry" (**hnyba**).

¹¹⁹³ The LXX and Peshitta read **rptwas** "scattered." Cf. Gordis, *Koheleth*, 131.

¹¹⁹⁴ The Qere reading suggests **qjry** "be distant, removed." The LXX reads **ajatrapph/(anatrepw)** i.e. "be overturned." Gordis, *Koheleth*, 337 points out that the LXX, Vulgate (*rumpatur*) and Peshitta favour the reading **qjry** i.e. "is destroyed," supporting the Ketib reading **qtry**. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 365 does not support this reading.

¹¹⁹⁵ The Qal impf. of **ʔxr** 'crush, break' may be taken as impersonal, without a need to emend the text, i.e. to read the verb as a Ni impf. **ʔwt**.

¹¹⁹⁶ The construct form **lbb** (also 1:2) should be noted. Interpreting it as an Aramaism is unnecessary, since the juxtaposition of the singular and plural is a way of expressing the superlative in Hebrew. Cf. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 101. The LXX reads **mataioth** and the Vulgate *vanitas*.

¹¹⁹⁷ The definite form **tlhgh** does not occur elsewhere in the book. In some manuscripts the definite article is lacking, but **tlhgh rna** does not have to be attributed to an editor. Cf. M.V. Fox, "Frame Narrative and Composition in the Book of Qohelet." *HUCA* 48 (1977): 83-106. He refers to Egyptian wisdom texts that are frequently framed by a third person introduction and conclusion. Contra Gordis, *Koheleth*, 339 who regards it as editorial insertion, like 12:9-14.

of the text, particularly in its description of deterioration and death, will be addressed in this section.

A: Qoh 11:7-10

Significant about **verse 7** is the exceedingly positive tone with which this literary unit commences.¹¹⁹⁹ In terms of Qohelet's argument light (**rw**)¹²⁰⁰ is sweet (**qvm**)¹²⁰¹ and it is good¹²⁰² for the eyes¹²⁰³ to see¹²⁰⁴ the sun.¹²⁰⁵ The context in which these images are employed characterise it as a reflection on the goodness of life, with **rw** and **vmv** functioning as metaphors for life.¹²⁰⁶ In v 7a **qvm** and **bvf** in 7b are used synonymously. The gist of his argument is that it is good to be alive.¹²⁰⁷ But such one sided view is soon to be qualified in 11:8b, where the themes of darkness (**ûvj**) and vanity (**lbh**) make their appearance in opposition to **rw** and **vmv** in v 7.¹²⁰⁸ Nevertheless, light and life are at issue in v 7. In v 7 **har** does not merely refer to sense perception, but also contributes in qualifying life as good.¹²⁰⁹ Indeed, the infinitive form of **har** (**twrl**) in v 7 may be interpreted as an idiom with the meaning "to be alive," or as a metaphor for life.¹²¹⁰ In this sense the eyes (**pyyl**) seeing the sun

¹¹⁹⁸ Klein, *Kohelet und die Weisheit Israels*, 150. He regards 11:7-12:7 as a textual unit, but reads 12:8 as part of the inclusion with 1:2.

¹¹⁹⁹ For Loader, *Ecclesiastes*, 130 the focus on the pleasantness of life presents one pole in the structure of Qohelet's thought.

¹²⁰⁰ In Qohelet **rw** has a low frequency, occurring as verb (Hi) in 8:1 and as noun in 2:13, 11:7 and 12:2 (subject).

¹²⁰¹ Cf. 5:11 for the only other occurrence of **qvm** in Qohelet.

¹²⁰² For **bvf** in Qohelet, cf. 2:1, 3, 26 (x2); 4:3, 6, 8, 9 (x2), 13; 5:4, 10, 17; 6:3 (x2), 9, 12; 7:1, 2, 3, 5, 8 (x2), 10, 11, 14, 18; 9:2 (x2), 4, 7, 16, 18; 11:6, 7; 12:14; as subject 2:24; 3:12, 22; 7:26; 8:12, 13, 15 and as object 2:24; 3:12, 13; 5:17; 6:6; 7:20; 9:18. In this regard A. Schoors, "Words Typical of Qohelet," in: A. Schoors (ed.), *Qohelet in the Context of Wisdom* (BETL 136; Leuven: University Press, 1998), 33 suggests that the common meaning of the adjective **bvf** is rare in Qohelet. In line with Qohelet's search for profit, **bvf** has the meaning of "beneficial, efficacious or of lasting value." It can further have an evaluative or ethical meaning, depending on its context of use in Qohelet.

¹²⁰³ For references to the eye (**yl**) in Qohelet, cf. 5:10; 6:9; 8:16; 11:7, 9; as object 1:8; 2:10, 14; 4:8.

¹²⁰⁴ For **har** in Qohelet cf. 1:8, 10, 14, 16; 2:1, 3, 12, 13, 24; 3:10, 13, 16, 18, 22 (x2); 4:1, 3, 4, 7, 15; 5:7, 12, 17 (x2); 6:1, 5, 6; 7:11, 13, 14, 15, 27, 29; 8:9, 10, 16 (x2), 17; 9:9, 11, 13; 10:5, 7; 11:4, 7; 12:3 (Qal); 2:24 (Hi).

¹²⁰⁵ In Qohelet **vmv** has a high frequency, particularly in the phrase **vmv tjt**. Cf. 1:3, 9, 14; 2:11, 17, 18, 19, 20, 22; 3:16; 4:11, 3, 7, 15; 5:12, 17; 6:1, 12; 7:11; 8:9, 15 (x2); 8:17; 9:3, 6, 9, 11, 13; 10:15; 6:5, 11:7 (object).

¹²⁰⁶ Loader, *Ecclesiastes*, 130.

¹²⁰⁷ Krüger, *Kohelet*, 345. He argues that 11:7, in the context of 11:1-12:7, makes clear that "das Leben unabhängig vom Erfolg menschlicher Arbeit (11:6) und von den Möglichkeiten und Grenzen verschiedener Lebensphasen (11:8ff) wertvoll ist." Similarly G.A. Barton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Ecclesiastes* (ICC; Edinburgh: Clark, 1908), 184 argued that in v 7, Qohelet recognises "the primal delight of mere living." But this reading is too positive, given the negative overtones that follow.

¹²⁰⁸ M.A. Beek, *Prediker / Hooglied* (POT; Nijkerk: Callenbach, 1984), 126.

¹²⁰⁹ A. Schoors, "The Verb **har** in the Book of Qohelet," in: A.A. Diesel, (ed.), *Jedes Ding hat seine Zeit: Studien zur israelitischen und altorientalische Weisheit* (BZAW 241; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1996), 227-228.

¹²¹⁰ Schoors, "The verb **har**," 227-228. Also Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 161. See also Qoh 6:5, 7:11 and Job 3:16. In Job 3:16 **rw har** "to see light" is used negatively in connection with the still-born. Cf. Schoors, "The verb **har**," 227. He also refers to possible connections of this line of thinking with the Hellenistic environment of Qohelet, e.g. the occurrence of the phrase *οραν φως ηελιοι* in the Odyssey of Homer (*Odyssey*, IV 540). Others try to relate this thinking with the Semitic environment, e.g. A.

presents a reference to the human desire to live.¹²¹¹ However, the metaphors for life employed in v 7 do not merely serve as a positive opening to this literary unit, but also sketches the background against which the negative images encountered in the following verses should be interpreted.¹²¹²

While the **win** v 7 introduces a new line of thinking in the thought of Qohelet and as such is not translated, the particle **yk** in **verse 8** is regarded as connecting it to v 7, particularly in the combination **pa yk** (“but if”). The positive tone set in v 7 is initially continued in v 8a, where the person (**udah**) who is to live many years (**hbrh pyv**) is exhorted to rejoice (**jmc**) in them all (**ulkb**),¹²¹³ i.e. in all the years of life. However, in v 8b we also encounter a different line of argumentation, indicated by the use of the **w** adversative (“but, yet”), as well as the theme of v 8b. The tension is further concretised by the chiasmic structure of the verse. The man that is to live many years should enjoy it in the knowledge, i.e. remembering (**rkz**)¹²¹⁴ the days of darkness (**uvjh myta**),¹²¹⁵ for (**yk**) they will be (**hyh**) many (**hbrh**). Further, the remembrance of the days of darkness coincides with the knowledge that everything (**lk**) that is to come is **lbh**.¹²¹⁶ This presents a tension in Qohelet’s argumentation. By means of this tension, centring round the verbs **jmc** and **rkz**, the pressing nature of the call to enjoyment is illustrated.¹²¹⁷ Against the backdrop of inevitable death, the emphasis on enjoyment in this life is highlighted.¹²¹⁸

Further, **uvjh myta** in tandem with **abvAlk** in 8c¹²¹⁹ functions as a metaphor for death,¹²²⁰ i.e. as a reference to the nothingness of Sheol,¹²²¹ which would then be

Lauha, *Kohelet* (BKAT 19; Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1978), 128 who refers to the Akkadian phrase *nura amaru*, “to see light.”

¹²¹¹ Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 317. Gordis, *Koheleth*, 324 indicates the comparability of this phrase with the Gilgamesh Epic, Tablet X, col. 1, line 13 which reads “Let my eyes see the sun, that I may be sated with light.” Cf. *ANET* (3d ed.; 1974), 89.

¹²¹² For Klein, *Kohelet*, 152 this reflects the spirit of Isa 22:13. Thus, through the enjoyment of life, remembrance of the creator is actualised. For this reason the *carpe diem* motif is theological in its motivation. Whybray, “Qohelet, Preacher of Joy,” 91 regards the theme of 11:7-12:1a as dominating the whole of 11:7-12:7.

¹²¹³ The preposition **b** can have a temporal function, referring to times rather than objects of enjoyment.

¹²¹⁴ While **rkz** is a leading verb in 11:7-12:8, it has a low frequency in Qohelet (cf. 5:19; 9:15; 11:8; 12:1). H. Eising, “**rkz**” in: *TDOT* (vol. 4; trans. D.E. Green; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1980), 64-82, at 67 points out that **rkz** in the HB implies a remembrance of past events in order to learn from their consequences with a view on the future. As such Qohelet’s use of **rkz** is striking, since Qoh 1:11 states that there will be no remembrance (**arkz pul hyhAl**) of former things or things to come.

¹²¹⁵ In Qohelet **uvj** has a low frequency. Cf. 2:13, 14; 5:16; 6:4 (x2); 11:8 as noun and 12:2, 3 as verb.

¹²¹⁶ In 5:7-6:9, particularly 5:19, the focus is on days past rather than the coming years. Man will not remember much (**rkzy hbrh al yk**) of these past days of his life.

¹²¹⁷ As jussives these two verbs anticipate the imperatives **jmc** (11:9a) and **rkz** (12:1a).

¹²¹⁸ Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 161. In light of Qoh 3:22 and 9:7-10, the reference to the days of darkness in 11:8 emphasises the call to enjoy life in the present, since everything that comes is vanity.

¹²¹⁹ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 348-349 observes that the phrase **abvAlk** is never used in Qohelet in reference to death and that in 5:14-15 and 2:12 it is used in reference to people coming into existence. As such v 8 could simply refer to anything or anyone that comes into existence.

¹²²⁰ For Wächter, *Der Tod im Alten Testament*, 189 **uvjh my** is a reference to the time after death, comparable to the condition of the dead envisioned in Job 3:13-18; 14:12.

¹²²¹ Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 161; Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 183. This view is also shared by Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 40. He argues that none of the usual meanings ascribed to **lbh** quite fit the context of v 8. Qohelet is warning not to expect more after death than what is experienced in life. Thus, **lbh** does

affirmed by the use of **lbh**.¹²²² In the context of v 8 the use of **ûvj** stands in contrast to the imagery of light (**rw**; **vmv**)¹²²³ in v 7 which function as metaphors for life. What is of more immediate importance is that the days of darkness (**ûvjh ymʾta**) are not limited to the end of one's life, but may already invade life in the present, i.e. while still alive. Here we encounter life's counter pole.¹²²⁴ Darkness, serving as a metaphor for death, hovers over the years of life as an ever threatening cloud.¹²²⁵ In this way the years of life and the days of darkness stand in an irresolvable tension.¹²²⁶ This tension continues in vv 9 and 10. Here we can argue that the value of a long life (Qoh 6:3-6),¹²²⁷ regarded as one of the rewards of living according to the principles of proverbial wisdom, is undermined by means of balancing life's value with its futility.¹²²⁸

The tension of vv 7 and 8 continues in **verse 9**. It commences with an imperative (**jmc**) addressed to the young man (**ryjb**)¹²²⁹ to make the most of his youth (**twlly**), and to let his heart (**bl**) cheer (**bfy**, Hi) him in the days of his youth (**ûtwryjb ymb**), and to walk (**ûlh**) in the ways (**ûrd**) of his heart (**bl**) and in the sights (**harm**)¹²³⁰ of his eyes.¹²³¹ This imperative is qualified by means of a **wadversative** ("yet, but"), for the addressee is reminded to keep in mind (**[dy impv.]**) that on account of all this (**hlaʾl kʾl [yk]**), i.e. the ways of the heart and the sight of the eyes, God (**pyhlah**) will

not refer to the eternity spent in death, for a goal is needed in order for something to be considered as **lbh**. Also Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 348-349 for the more general use of **lbh** as "nothingness."

¹²²² For Gordis, *Koheleth*, 324 **ûvjh ymʾta** present an instance of anticipation. I.e. anticipating the darkening of the luminaries in 12:2, which not merely points to cessation of human existence (individual and communal), but also to the end of creation as such. But this is difficult to substantiate from the text.

¹²²³ Here **ûvjh ymʾta** should not be interpreted as a reference to "old age," since there is no way of knowing that they will be many. Cf. Gordis, *Koheleth*, 324. Rather, **ûvj** can rather be interpreted as an epithet for death. See also Tromp, *Primitive Conceptions*, 190 for whom 11:8 provides an instance where Qoheleth's contrasts "darkness" and "life." Cf. Job 16:22, "When a few years have passed, then I shall go the way from which I shall not return."

¹²²⁴ Loader, *Ecclesiastes*, 130.

¹²²⁵ Darkness is a recurring theme in prophetic literature, e.g. Isa 5:30, 8:22, 13:9b-10; Amos 5:18-20; Zeph 1:15; Ezek 32: 7-8. Cf. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 339.

¹²²⁶ Here the call to remember (death) has the rhetorical function to persuade the reader to "lay hold of the pleasures that will divert our thoughts from death." Cf. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 317.

¹²²⁷ Krüger, *Kohelet*, 346.

¹²²⁸ Kamano, *Cosmology and Character*, 222.

¹²²⁹ A shift in tone coincides with a change of addressee. The general and abstract **pdah** of 11:8 is no longer used, but **ryjb**. Cf. Loader, *Ecclesiastes*, 130. Cf. also W.L. Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1971), 36 pointing out that the word has the meaning of a "fully grown, vigorous, unmarried man." Cf. 1 Kgs 12:21; 2 Chr 25:5. This direction of speech to the **ryjb** is characteristic of sapiential language, but in HB wisdom literature **ryjb** only occurs here and in Prov 20:29. Here **yb** "my son" might have been expected since it is frequently employed in Proverbs (e.g. 1:8, 10, 15).

¹²³⁰ For Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 317 the use of the plural **yarm** "sights" is significant, indicating the variety of pleasures to be pursued, rather than abstract "vision."

¹²³¹ This instruction is contra that of Num 15:39, "search not after your own heart and your own eyes." Instead of an instruction to walk in the way (**ûrd**) of wisdom, the young man is instructed to walk in the way of his heart. Cf. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 184. But some have observed that this instruction is comparable to the Egyptian *Instruction of Ptah-hotep* containing the phrase, "Follow your hart so long as you live." Cf. Gordis, *Koheleth*, 325; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 349. See also Qoh 6:9, "Better is the sight of the eyes than the wandering of desire; for this is also vanity and vexation of spirit." At issue is enjoyment rather than the making of ethical decisions. Cf. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 350. Cf. 5:10; 7:3.

bring (**awb**, Hi) him to judgment (**fpvm**).¹²³² In v 9 the tension in the instruction of Qohelet is clear. While the instruction to rejoice (**jnc**) and to be gladdened (**bfi**) relates to the **jnc** motif in 11:8, and the general theme of v 7, it stands in opposition to the observation in 11:10, namely that childhood and youth are **lhh**. That the tension in the instruction of Qohelet in v 9 poses a problem for interpreters is evident from an early stage. Some LXX manuscripts added **αμωμο**, i.e. “blamelessly,” while others went even further, qualifying the reference to the “sight of your eyes” by means of the negative particle **mh**, i.e. “and not in the sight of your eyes.” In the MT a tension is retained.

In v 9f the reference to the judgment (**fpvm**) of God is rather out of place and its interpretation depends on the value ascribed to the particle **win** v 9e. If it is interpreted as consecutive, which we do not, the implication is that God will bring into judgment those that do not enjoy all that has been given to them.¹²³³ But in view of God’s judgment (**fpvm**) over all works in 12:14a, this interpretation is contradictory. In terms of this interpretation, the reference to the judgment of God does not have to be regarded as redactional,¹²³⁴ and it brings v 9f in closer proximity with the foregoing instruction to the youth. However, instead of explaining away the tension in the text,¹²³⁵ we read the **was** adversative (“yet, but”).¹²³⁶ As such the reference to God’s judgment is not explained away as an editorial gloss from an orthodox redactor.¹²³⁷ Living with the knowledge of divine judgment over human works prevents a hedonistic attitude in the time of youth, but also contributes to the characterisation of this time as **lhh**, as seen in 11:10. The question remains why God requires humans to enjoy the time of youth,¹²³⁸ when it is judged to be **lhh**. This contributes to the devaluation of youth as an object of joy in Qohelet.¹²³⁹ Divine judgment also brings into focus the theme of death.¹²⁴⁰ For if the judgment implies punishment, does it include death, and if so, at what stage? If **fpvm** is to be understood in the sense of

¹²³² For **fpvmin** Qohelet, cf. 3:16; 5:7; 11:9; 12:14; 8:5, 6 (subject). In v 9 it constitutes a restrictive element in the thought of Qohelet, as in 8:6, 3:17, and 8:11. Cf. Loader, *Polar Structures*, 130.

¹²³³ Gordis, *Koheleth*, 186, 326.

¹²³⁴ Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 184; N. Lohfink, “Freu dich, Jüngling – doch nicht, weil du jung bist. Zum Formproblem im Schlußgedicht Kohelets (Koh 11:9-12:8).” *BI* 3 (1995): 162-164; For Perdue, *Wisdom and Creation*, 232 it presents the voice of a redactor.

¹²³⁵ Qohelet’s *sic et non* style of argumentation constitutes a reaction against traditional modes of sapiential reasoning. Cf. Loader, *Polar Structures*, 132-33.

¹²³⁶ Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Nicht im Menschen*, 226 ascribes 11:9b to a second epilogist. Cf. also Michael, *Qohelet*, 166-167. Kamano, *Cosmology and Character*, 224, rejects the translation ‘but,’ reading ‘and.’ Thus he shares the view of Fox, Seow, Gordis, while Klein, Murphy, Whybray, Crenshaw, Lohfink, Loader, Zimmermann, Hertzberg, Zimmerli translate “but.” Yet not all who translate the **was** adversative “but” view the line as an editorial gloss.

¹²³⁷ In 12:14a, it is stated that God will bring every work into judgment (**fpvnb**), but this belongs to the later redactional epilogue.

¹²³⁸ The HB reflects no clear consciousness of childhood as a distinct phase of life and that before Qohelet childhood is not referred to in an abstract sense as it is here in the reference to the days of youth (**twly**). Cf. J. Blenkinsopp, “The Family in First Temple Israel,” in: L.G. Perdue et al., *Families in Ancient Israel* (Westminster: John Knox Press, 1997), 67. Cf. Isa 54:6 (**pyrw**) and in Jer 32:30 (**twv**) for references to “youth.”

¹²³⁹ Gordis, *Koheleth*, 235 argues differently, namely that for Qohelet “the enjoyment of life becomes the highest dictate of life.”

¹²⁴⁰ This connection is rejected by Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 162 and defended by Kamano, *Cosmology and Character*, 224-225 who, following Loader, sees here a correspondence with 3:17; 9:1-2 and 2:26. But to identify here a distinction made in death between those who have enjoyed what has been given them and those who do not is claiming too much.

“righteousness” (**hqdx**), then the argument of v 9b is even more out of place, seeing the questioning of the principle of retribution (*Tun-Ergehen-Zusammenhang*) in Qohelet and the distrust of divine justice. Here we can refer to what Qohelet perceives as twisted divine humour, since everything has its time and place (3:1ff), but humans cannot know it (3:11).

By means of the **w**consecutive the theme of v 9 is continued in **verse 10**. Particularly v 10a latches unto 11:9a-d. In v 10 the **ryjb** addressed in v 9 (indicated by the second person masculine singular suffix) is instructed to remove (**rw**, Hi impv.) trouble (**s[k]**)¹²⁴¹ from his heart¹²⁴² and to rid (**rb**[, Hi impv.])¹²⁴³ his flesh¹²⁴⁴ from evil (**h[r]**).¹²⁴⁵ In this way v 10a-b elaborates on the call to enjoy the days of youth, and depending on the interpretation of the **win** v 9e, the avoidance of divine judgment. The further elaboration in 10c, constituting a motivational clause introduced by the particle **yk**, is puzzling however. For why the call to enjoyment of youth in 10a-b, when it is subsequently described as **lbh** in 10c? In this sense 11:10b anticipates 12:1.¹²⁴⁶ The admonitions of 10a-b are motivated (**yk**) by 10c, namely that childhood (**twly**) and youth (**twjv**)¹²⁴⁷ are **lbh**. In this regard the interpretation of **lbh** is significant. If it is used in the sense of “vanity,” we have a negative evaluation of the time of youth, but if **lbh** is used in the sense of “fleeting,”¹²⁴⁸ 10c serves as motivation to make the most of youth while it lasts. Thus, depending on the interpretation of **lbh**, v 10 presents the complement or converse of v 9.¹²⁴⁹ The matter is further problematised if 11:9f, as 11:10c is interpreted as editorial gloss¹²⁵⁰ that presents a secondary expansion¹²⁵¹ on the time of youth. This presents the easier interpretation, given that 10c contrasts the admonition to rid the heart from sorrow

¹²⁴¹ For **s[k]** in Qohelet cf. 1:18; 2:23 (noun); 5:16; 7:3, 9 (subject); 11:10 (object).

¹²⁴² For **bl** in Qohelet, cf. 1:16; 2:1, 3, 15(x 2), 22; 3:11, 17, 18; 5:19; 7:2, 25; 9:1, 3, 7; 11:9, 10; as subject 1:16; 2:3, 10, 23; 5:1; 7:3, 4, 22, 26; 8:5, 11; 9:3; 10:2, 3; 11:9; as object 1:13, 17; 2:10, 20; 7:7, 21; 8:9, 16. Here **bl** is indicative of “life.” Cf. H.W. Wolff, *Anthropologie des Alten Testaments* (München: Kaiser Verlag, 1973), 68ff for a discussion of the different meaning contexts for **bl**. Here both physical and psychological displeasure is implied by means of the use of **s[k]**.

¹²⁴³ Here **rb** (Hi) occurs as *hapax* in Qohelet.

¹²⁴⁴ For **rb** in Qohelet, cf. 12:12; as object 2:3; 4:5; 5:5.

¹²⁴⁵ In 11:10b **h[r]** is antithetical to that which is said to be **bwf**.

¹²⁴⁶ According to Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 39 **lbh** should be interpreted in the light of 12:1, where the brevity of youth is the cause for urgency in making use of life’s opportunities. So it is not the time of youth, but the brevity of youth that leads to the evaluation of it being **lbh**. Youth is not accredited a superior value over old age, but rather emphasises the importance of enjoying life in the present, without postponing joy to an unsure future. Cf. Krüger, *Kohelet*, 348.

¹²⁴⁷ The hapax **twjv** refers to the “dawn of life” (from **rjv** “dawn”), or the “time of black hair” (from **rjv** “black”), i.e. as an epithet for youth. In case of the latter it presents a contrast with **hbyc** “grey head” as an epithet for old age. Cf. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 319. The problematic nature of the form **twjv** is reflected in different textual versions. The Vulgate reads “desire” (*voluptas*), the LXX “lack of understanding” (*ἀποία*), and the Peshitta “no knowledge” (*l’yd’t*). These readings support the notion that the Hebrew verb used here is related to the verb **rjv** “to seek, search” (e.g. Prov 1:28; 8:17). Cf. J.L. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 184.

¹²⁴⁸ Cf. Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 113, Gordis, *Koheleth*, 337; Fox, *Qohelet and his Contradictions*, 279-280.

¹²⁴⁹ Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 318. He interprets v 10 as the complement rather than the converse of 11:9.

¹²⁵⁰ Michel, *Qohelet*, 166-167 translates 11:10b as “denn Jugend und dunkles Haar sind vergänglich.”

¹²⁵¹ Lauha, *Kohelet*, 209. Not so Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Nicht im Menschen*, 227.

(**s[k]**)¹²⁵² and the flesh from evil (**h[r]**),¹²⁵³ but not necessarily the better interpretation. As in 11:9 we here encounter a tension in the text inherent to the argumentation of Qohelet. Youth and childhood as such are not negatively evaluated, but rather its brevity. However this also has a negative potential, since that achieved during the time of youth is short-lived and of no lasting significance. Thus, from childhood humanity is confronted with its brevity. Nevertheless, the most should be made of this time of vigour and virility, as perhaps the opening imperative of 12:1 suggests.

B: 12:1-8

The tension in 11:7-10 between the call to enjoyment (**jmc**) and the remembrance (**rkz**) of life's brevity (cf. Job 9:25-26) and the futility of human endeavours lacks in 12:1-8. Qoh 12:1a does commence with an imperative to remember (**rkz**), but an admonition to rejoice is absent. In 12:1-8 the *memento mori* motif is dominant.¹²⁵⁴ Here Qohelet is enticing a particular attitude toward aging and death,¹²⁵⁵ for which the stage is already set in 11:7-10. By means of an interaction between literal and symbolic types of meaning in 12:1-8, an acute awareness is created of death's inevitability. As such the rhetorical intent of the text is important. The only occurrence in Qohelet of a direct addressee is encountered in 11:9 (**ryb**) and 12:1a (second person masculine singular suffix **ð**). For this reason the final literary unit of Qohelet constitutes an instruction to youth regarding approaching death and the brevity, by implication vanity, of life.¹²⁵⁶

In **verse 12:1a** a new line of thinking is introduced in the argument of Qohelet by means of the **w** This is indicated by the imperative **rkz**, and the reference to the "days of your youth" (**ûtryb ynb**). In 12:1a it is particularly the form **ûyarb** that presents exegetical difficulties. The two most likely interpretations are "your creator," from the verb **arb** and "your grave," from the noun **rb**.¹²⁵⁷ This could very well be an intentional ambiguity in the text.¹²⁵⁸ The participle form of **arb** occurs nowhere else in

¹²⁵² Here **s[k]** implies "vexation" or "madness," as in Qoh 1:18, 2:23, 7:3, 5:16. I.e. that which causes the "heart" to be troubled.

¹²⁵³ Sir 30:21-25 reflects a comparable line of thinking, 21 "Give not over thy mind to heaviness, and afflict not thyself in thine own counsel. 22 The gladness of the heart is the life of man, and the joyfulness of a man longeth his days. 23 Love thine own soul, and comfort thy heart, remove sorrow far from thee: for sorrow hath killed many, and there is no profit therein. 24 Envy and wrath shorten the life, and carefulness bringeth age before the time. 25 A cheerful and good heart will have a care of his meat and diet." (KJV Apocrypha, 1995).

¹²⁵⁴ As such 12:1-7 achieves a degree of independence from 11:7-10. Cf. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 333.

¹²⁵⁵ Fox, *Qohelet and his Contradictions*, 298.

¹²⁵⁶ Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 114. In terms of form, theme and ideology Qohelet resembles the genre of didactic wisdom literature, but cannot be connected to a specific wisdom school. Cf. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 5-6.

¹²⁵⁷ K. Galling, *Der Prediger*, in: E. Würthwein et al., *Die fünf Megilloth: Ruth, Das Hohelied, Esther, Der Prediger, Die Klagelieder* (HAT 18; Tübingen: Mohr Paul Siebeck, 1969), 122. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 184-185 points to the interpretation of **ûrab** "your well," as implying "your wife" (Prov 5:15). But his interpretation is only sensible if Qohelet here aims at a threefold understanding, namely your creator, your grave, your wife, as encountered in the homily of Rabbi Akiba. Cf. Kamano, *Cosmology and Character*, 225. **ûrb** i.e. "your vigour" has also been suggested.

¹²⁵⁸ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 351-52 allows for such ambiguity in the interpretation of **ûyarb**. Reference has been made to the technique of *antanaclasis*, i.e. where a particular word reflects two or more contrasting

the HB, and **arb** does not occur elsewhere in the HB wisdom literature (except Ps 104:24).¹²⁵⁹ The plural form of **ûyarb** is explainable as an instance of the *Majestätsp pluralis* (cf. Gen 1:26; 3:22).¹²⁶⁰ The reading “your grave” (**ûrb**) dovetails with the “days of darkness” in 11:8b and latches unto 12:6, where **rb** occurs (compare Job 21:32). But this reading is also problematic since the days of darkness in 11:8b does not necessarily refer to time spent in death, and since **rb** in 12:6 does not necessarily refer to the grave.¹²⁶¹ The *lectio difficilior* is adhered to and “your creator” is read.¹²⁶² Thematically it fits the context well¹²⁶³ and does not require an emendation of the text.¹²⁶⁴

In the context of 12:1a, to “remember your creator” has the implication of remembering that you were created,¹²⁶⁵ which in turn calls to mind the ephemeral nature of human life.¹²⁶⁶ Such a constant awareness of one’s finite nature could either have a motivating function, urging to make the most of life *Diesseits*. Or it could have a de-motivating effect, seeing that life and its possibilities are framed by the limits set by the grave, i.e. by death. Reading **ûyarb** in 12:1a as “your creator” does not nullify the call to enjoyment in 11:9a-10a, but rather qualifies it. Here the good in life, i.e. one’s share (**qlj**), is balanced by life’s negative side, indicated by the theme of **lbb**.¹²⁶⁷ Enjoyment and death are closely tied to the divinely established order in which created beings have to live.

and often comic scenes. Cf. Tribble, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 249. But seeing the absence of the comic, identifying here such a rhetorical technique is unfitting.

¹²⁵⁹ In Qohelet **hc** is mostly used in reference to the works of God. Cf. Klein, *Kohelet*, 151.

¹²⁶⁰ Lohfink, *Kohelet*, 83 regards this use of the royal plural as unusual. But this form requires no emendation of the MT. Cf. Gordis, *Koheleth*, 330. See also Isa 54:5 (**ûyc** [**ûyl** [**b yk**], Ps 149:2 (**yc** [] and Job 35:10 (**yc** [] where a similar use occurs in reference to God. The form **ôa** **rb** “your creator” in Isa 43:1 is singular. Cf. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 351. The use of **ûyarb** in 12:1a is comparable to the participle form **hc** [] “maker,” which occurs in the wisdom material in Job 4:17; 35:10; Prov 22:2 (14:31, 17:5 as object).

¹²⁶¹ Lohfink, *Kohelet*, 83. For **rb** in HB wisdom literature, see Prov 1:12; 5:15; 28:17.

¹²⁶² For Schoors, *The Preacher Sought to Find Pleasing Words*, 73 **ûyarb** in 12:1 “certainly” has the meaning “your creator,” while the plural form expresses “excellence” like in **pyhla**.

¹²⁶³ Cf. Loader, *Polar Structures*, 110. The perception of God as creator or giver of life’s opportunities is also reflected in the creation motif of Qoh 3:11. Michel, *Qohelet*, 167 (also Gallig and Lauha) regards “your creator” as an orthodox gloss. So also Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 185, for whom the reference to the creator does not fit the context and interrupts the thought sequence from 11:10a to 12:1b. Qoh 12:1a is necessary however, since 12:1b cannot be joined directly to 11:10b as a temporal clause. Further, without 12:1a, 12:3-7 lacks a main clause. Cf. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 322.

¹²⁶⁴ Zimmerli, “Unveränderbare Welt oder Gott ist Gott?,” 111 argued that “Es ist ein Mißgriff, diese gewichtigste Gottesbenennung in der Aufgipfelung der ganzen Weisheitslehre des Predigers, die nur hier einmal mit dem persönlichen Suffixpronomen versehen ist..., eliminieren zu wollen.”

¹²⁶⁵ Perdue, *Wisdom and Creation*, 233-234 regards **ûyarb** as a reference to the womb, i.e. “remember where you come from.” As such it contrasts with 11:5, where the formation of the bones in the womb (**fb**) as part of the divine works (**hc** [**m**]) are said to be unknowable. Seeing the absence of individual creation or divine nurture in Qohelet, a reference to the womb would merely be another reference to human mortality. Remembering either the creator or the grave brings to mind the **plw** **tyb** as inevitable.

¹²⁶⁶ Krüger, *Kohelet*, 349. This “cradle to the grave” perception of life fits the context well.

¹²⁶⁷ In a sense, Qohelet wants his readers “to acknowledge the significance of both death and enjoyment for a lifestyle that copes with the world God has created.” (cf. 9:1-10). Cf. Kamano, *Cosmology and Character*, 226. This line of argumentation stands opposite the view of Whybray (seeing Qohelet as a ‘preacher of joy’) and more in line with the argumentation of Crenshaw (taking full cognizance of the ‘shadow of death’ in Qohelet).

This ambiguity of **ûyarwb** also brings into focus the meaning of **rkz**. The most probable meaning in the context is “remember” or “think of.” But **rkz** could also be interpreted as “fear,”¹²⁶⁸ bringing 12:1a into proximity with 3:14, 5:6, 7:18, 8:12-13, and 12:13, as well as 1:11 which recalls human failure to remember.¹²⁶⁹ Interpreting **rkz** as “fear” also calls to mind the “fear of YHWH” (**hby tary**) as the beginning of wisdom (cf. Prov 1:7). Remembrance is a crucial element for the actualisation of wisdom’s potential (cf. Qoh 9:13-16).¹²⁷⁰ In 12:1a **rkz** is best understood in the sense of “remember,” corresponding with the use of **rkz** in 11:8c. Remembering the creator already implies a sense of reverence, rendering an interpretation of “fear” as superfluous. The imperative **rkz** can also be linked to 11:9f, i.e. remembering **pyhlah** who will judge all that one does in youth. The creator occupies a central place in the orientation toward life. From the time of youth described in 11:7-10 and 12:1a, through the process of aging until the moment of death described in 12:1b-12:7.

This call to “remember your creator” in 12:1a is specified by the reference to the “days of your youth,” but also by the temporal clause **al rva dl** (“before”) in 12:1b (also 2a, 6a).¹²⁷¹ The creator should be remembered before the “evil days” (**h[rh yny]**) come, which are synonymous with the years (**pyw**) that draw near (**[g]**) of which the addressee will say, “I have no delight in them” (**Apj pbb yAya**).¹²⁷² As such the “days of your youth” (**ûtryjb yny**) of 12:1a are contrasted with the “evil days” (**h[rh yny]**) of 12:1b-d. The “evil days” also serve as preamble to that which is described in 12:2-6.¹²⁷³ Whether **pbb** refers to both the “evil days” and the “years of displeasure” is not entirely clear from the text, but in 12:1 they function synonymously. Grammatically **pbb** could also refer to the “days of your youth” (**ûtryjb yny**) of 12:1a, but this is unlikely. The “evil days” and “years of displeasure,” which serve as an epithet for old age¹²⁷⁴ or merely bad times that await the youthful addressee in the future,¹²⁷⁵ are the likely reference. Thus, in 12:1 we encounter a first step toward Qohelet’s vivid description of human frailty.¹²⁷⁶

In **verse 2** the theme of light introduced in 11:7-8 is picked up again by means of the temporal clause **al rva dl**.¹²⁷⁷ In 12:2 the sun (**vmv**), light (**rva**), moon (**jry**) and stars (**pybkwk**) are contrasted with darkness (**ûvj**),¹²⁷⁸ which continues with the return (**bw**)

¹²⁶⁸ Kamano, *Cosmology and Character*, 226 refers to this reading of Gregory Thaumaturgos.

¹²⁶⁹ Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 320.

¹²⁷⁰ Kamano, *Cosmology and Character*, 226.

¹²⁷¹ In 12:1-6 the temporal clauses and adverbial phrases do not introduce descriptions of chaos before the event of creation, but rather “a state of non-existence following the end of creation.” Cf. Perdue, *Wisdom and Creation*, 234. Thus it differs from e.g. Gen 1:1-2, 2:4b-5, Prov 8:22-26 where it provides a prologue to divine creation, which is described in terms of what did not exist previously.

¹²⁷² In 2:17-18 Qohelet claims to have hated (**arc**) life.

¹²⁷³ Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 163.

¹²⁷⁴ Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 322. Here it is not necessary to interpret the “evil days” and the “years of unpleasantness” as the eternity of death or the time spent in Sheol.

¹²⁷⁵ Krüger, *Kohelet*, 349. The interpretation of **pyw** in 12:1 as related to the particular time described in 12:2, i.e. an eschatological interpretation such as Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 53 offers is difficult to maintain, since eschatology is not a theme in the wider context of Qohelet.

¹²⁷⁶ Loader, *Polar Structures*, 131.

¹²⁷⁷ Sawyer, “Ruined House,” 523. Krüger, *Kohelet*, 353 also points out that 12:2 is taking up images of 11:7.

¹²⁷⁸ Here **vmv** and **rva** should not be equated. Cf. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 353. Thus a translation “and the light of the moon and stars” for **pybkbhwjryh rwhw** i.e. as hendiadys, is not wishful. Some

of the clouds (**pyb**l) after the rain (**pygh rja**). In 11:7a light is characterised as sweet, while it is perceived as being darkened in 12:2a. In this way the admonition in 12:1a “remember your creator” applies to the time before light is darkened in 12:2a. Since light in 11:7 and 12:2 serves as epithet for life (cf. Ps 56:13),¹²⁷⁹ the admonition to remember your creator in 12:1a concerns the time “before” the light of life is extinguished, i.e. before death sets in. Indeed, the dead will never more see the light (cf. Ps 49:19b; 58:8). Therefore, in other contexts, a plea is directed toward YHWH not to take away the light of the eyes prematurely (cf. Ps 13:3; 38:10). The description of the luminaries in 12:2 differs from that in Gen 1:1-2:4a, since it is not said to be created or divinely placed. It is merely mentioned as part of creation, as in Deutero-Isaiah. In Gen 1:1-2:4a the luminaries are mentioned as part of the process of divine creation, while in Qoh 12:2 their mentioning is indicative of an undoing of creation.¹²⁸⁰ I.e. the reverse happens of what one would expect, namely the extinguishing of light leading to the return of primeval darkness.¹²⁸¹ The interpretation of 12:2 is problematic in view of 12:1b-d.¹²⁸² The extinguishing of cosmic lights is characteristic of the evil days, but as argued the “evil days” most probably refer to the approaching time of old age. If the temporal clause **al rva d**l indicates a move to another scene in 12:2a,¹²⁸³ then the darkening of light should not be read as synonymous with the evil days. Seeing that the addressee introduced in 11:9 has now disappeared from the scene, this is a tenable interpretation. As such 12:2-6 does not merely present an elaboration on the days of unpleasantness introduced in 12:1b by means of **al rva d**l.

The background of the imagery employed in 12:2¹²⁸⁴ is suggestive of the Palestinian winter season, of an approaching storm, or of imagery related to the day of YHWH.¹²⁸⁵ Since the imagery in 12:2 implies complete darkness,¹²⁸⁶ eschatology also

commentators translate 12:2a with “the bright stars.” Cf. Klein, *Kohelet*, 153; Gordis, *Koheleth*, 331; Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 185; Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 164. But given that in different contexts, e.g. Gen 1:3-4, 14-18, “light” and “sun” are regarded as two separate entities, they should rather be translated as such in this context. It is also tenable that **rva** is used to create a double pairing similar to 11:7, namely “sun and light” and “moon and stars.” Cf. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 322. With death, light itself goes dark.

¹²⁷⁹ Barth, *Die Errettung*, 28. In the wider context of the HB light becomes the embodiment of good against bad, of cosmos cover against chaos, and of life in contrast to death.

¹²⁸⁰ For Krüger, *Kohelet*, 357 the notion of an eschatological undoing of creation is made undone by 12:1-7 as in 1:9-11. The concern in 12:1-7 is the death of the individual. He observes that in 12:1-7, such an eschatological end of creation is not to be feared more than the natural death of the individual, and neither is more hope to be found in this event than in natural death.

¹²⁸¹ Isa 24:2 also describes the world turned upside down. Cf. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 340-41. Isa 21:3 provides an example of the torment accompanying an approaching cataclysm. But as already stated, language employed in this literary unit should not be interpreted as eschatological too hastily.

¹²⁸² Von Rad in his *Weisheit in Israel* argued that eschatological thinking in the HB has its origin in the wisdom tradition rather than the prophetic tradition. But with this argument von Rad did not convince the scholarly community.

¹²⁸³ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 353.

¹²⁸⁴ No absolute meaning, be it anthropological, eschatological, or theological is ascribable to 12:2-6. Cf. Krüger, *Kohelet*, 354.

¹²⁸⁵ Cf. Ezek 30:3; Joel 2:10; 4:12, 15 HB; Jer 13:16; Isa 13:10; also Isa 30:26; 2 Sam 23:4.

¹²⁸⁶ For Perdue, *Wisdom and Creation*, 235 the darkening of the light, signalling the end of the world, is a common motif in cosmological myths of reversal, prophetic eschatology and apocalyptic (e.g. Job 9:7; Jer 4:23; Amos 5:8; Hab 3:11). In terms of such a reversion the language is also comparable to that of the flood tradition (Gen 6-8 and Amos 5:8). Such language of reversion makes the admonition to remember your creator in 12:1a seem very ironic. Cf. Seow, “Qohelet’s Eschatological Poem,” 214.

comes into focus.¹²⁸⁷ Such an eschatological interpretation could bring 12:2 in proximity with the divine judgment mentioned in 11:9,¹²⁸⁸ but this view is not shared here, given the absence of eschatology in the wider context of Qohelet. However, the return of the clouds after the rain¹²⁸⁹ implies that there is no reason for hope of better days.¹²⁹⁰ The darkening of light in 12:2 presents a description of the cessation of human life.¹²⁹¹ The primary concern is with individual death, given the envisioned addressee of 11:7-12:8. That Qohelet's argument in 12:2 has cosmic implications, i.e. that the whole of creation becomes darkened, is of secondary importance.¹²⁹² In terms of an allegorical interpretation,¹²⁹³ identifying in 12:2-6 a description of human frailty, deterioration and approaching death, 12:2 presents a reference to failing sight resulting from this process of deterioration.¹²⁹⁴ But instead of interpreting 12:2 as describing a stage in the process of physical deterioration, it is better interpreted as the end of this process, when eternal darkness, i.e. death, sets in.

Here it should be noted that the imagery in verses 3-6 is mostly interpreted either allegorically, i.e. as a description of the physical deterioration of the body leading to death,¹²⁹⁵ or metaphorically, as a description of a ruined house.¹²⁹⁶ According to a

Yet the creator (**pyhla**) who created the light and placed the luminaries in the heavens (Gen 1:3-4; 15-17) is not here responsible for its undoing.

¹²⁸⁷ Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 322 points to the place of clouds in eschatological contexts, e.g. Ezek 30:3, 32:7. For Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 353 Qohelet's use of eschatological language is comparable to that found in the inscription at *Tell Deir 'Alla*, containing a vision of an end brought to life by the deities.

¹²⁸⁸ This imagery could be suggestive of the myth of the divine warrior's march to battle, accompanied by dark rain clouds, describing a time of doom. Cf. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 253.

¹²⁸⁹ The normal cycle of nature (cf. Qoh 1:5) with the sun rising and going down, is no longer at issue. The normal *Erfahrungswirklichkeit* has been overthrown. Cf. Krüger, *Kohelet*, 353. This is indicated by the use of **rja**, i.e. that the clouds return after the rain. There is no reprieve due to this reversal of the expected order. Thus it is not necessary to translate **rja** as "with." Similarly Lohfink, *Kohelet*, 84 regards 12:2 as the beginning of Qohelet's allegorical engagement with the *Erfahrungswelt*. Yet he regards the language employed here to be in line with apocalyptic reasoning of *Weltuntergang*, but he does not regard this as the absolute interpretation.

¹²⁹⁰ Sawyer, "Ruined House," 523. The imagery in 12:2 can also be interpreted as imagery for life that has become darkened, destined for death. This is in line with the imagery employed in 11:7-12:8. Cf. Schwienerhorst-Schönberger, *Nicht im Menschen*, 222.

¹²⁹¹ As such the reference to light in 11:7 as an epithet for being alive stands in contrast with the darkening of the light as an epithet for being dead. Cf. Kamano, *Cosmology and Character*, 230.

¹²⁹² Seow, "Qohelet's Eschatological Poem," 212-213 suggests such a move. He argues that 12:2-6 not merely describe aging and dying, but rather a cosmic disaster is depicted as a metaphor for the end of life. In this way the death of the individual would become part of a greater "death." Comparable is the language of Isa 5:30, 13:10; Ezek 32:7-8; Amos 5:8, 8:9; Mic 3:6; Joel 2:10, 3:4; Job 3:9, but Qohelet's language should not be equated with the rhetoric of prophetic eschatology describing great disaster.

¹²⁹³ If the essence of allegory is that it consists of a coherent series of metaphors forming a consistent whole, vv 2-6 should not be seen as an allegory. Cf. Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 163. Also Lohfink, *Kohelet*, 84. But individual verses can still be regarded as allegorical in its meaning.

¹²⁹⁴ Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 185.

¹²⁹⁵ Such interpretations are suggestive, but care should be taken not to allegorise Qohelet in saying metaphorically something different from what it says literally. Cf. Scott, *The Way of Wisdom*, 170.

¹²⁹⁶ Sawyer, "Ruined House," 521. He interprets 12:3-6 as a parable of a ruined house. In comparing 12:1-6 with Job 5:2-5 he argues that structurally 12:3-5 is more likely a parable about the failure of human efforts in general than of an allegory about old age. For Sawyer, "Ruined House," 523-24 Qoh 12 offers a "supreme example" of nature's uncontrollable assault upon human efforts. This contrast between passing generations and creation's unchangeable nature is already seen in 1:4.

more literal interpretation a funerary procession is being described.¹²⁹⁷ Other suggestions include an approaching storm,¹²⁹⁸ or Palestinian winter's day.¹²⁹⁹ The imagery employed in 12:3 is not singular in meaning. We will consider particularly the image of the body, ruined house and funerary procession to determine which best fits a particular image.

The darkening of light as a theme in 12:2 does not continue in **verse 3**, and the relation of 12:2 and v 3 is not self-evident. If 12:2 is interpreted allegorically as a stage in the process of physical deterioration, then 12:3 presents another stage in this process, establishing a connection between v 2 and v 3. But such an interpretation does not best fit v 2. As such the function of **v pyb** in 12:3a is significant. If it is interpreted as another temporal clause, i.e. “on the day when,”¹³⁰⁰ the events described in 12:3-5 relate to that of 12:2.¹³⁰¹ Such a temporal function implies that the events described in 12:3-5 is happening “on the day,” i.e. suddenly.

In 12:3a **pyb** has a temporal function connecting the events described in v 3 with that of v 2. Such a connection is not that evident if we consider the imagery introduced in v 3.¹³⁰² In 12:3a the keepers of the house (**tybh yrm**) that tremble (**[w]**)¹³⁰³ are introduced. The identity of the subject and reason for the action, i.e. as reaction or in expectation, is disputable, as evidenced by the variety of interpretation possibilities. In terms of an allegorical interpretation the “keepers of the house” can refer to the limbs of the body, trembling as a result of old age (contra Cant 5:15),¹³⁰⁴ while they may be regarded as actual servants, i.e. as labourers or guards of a house in the case of the “ruined house” imagery.¹³⁰⁵ In terms of this interpretation, and in view of the relation between the imagery of 12:2 and 12:3-5, the “trembling” could result from the darkening of the light and luminaries, coinciding with the unexpected return of the clouds after the rain (12:2).

¹²⁹⁷ Fox, *Qohelet and his Contradictions*, 302-3. He shares the view of C. Taylor, *The Dirge of Coheleth* (London, 1874), iii-iv, namely that 12:2-5 describes the state of a household or community on occasion of death and mourning.

¹²⁹⁸ C.D. Ginsberg, *The Song of Songs and Coheleth* (LBS; New York: KTAV, 1970), 457-458.

¹²⁹⁹ For Loretz, *Qohelet und der Alte Orient*, 191-192 this literary description serves as a metaphor for old age.

¹³⁰⁰ See Shoors, *The Preacher*, 54-56 for the use of the relative pronoun **v** in Qohelet.

¹³⁰¹ Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 322-23. But the “remembering” of 12:1a should take place before the events of 12:3-5. Thus **v pyb** elaborates on what happens when the day darkens (12:2). The use of the singular “day” contrasts with the plural “days” of 11:8 and 12:1. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 354 points to the connection between 12:2 and 12:3-5 and argues for a connection of 12:3-5 with the eschatological rhetoric of 12:2. So also Perdue, *Wisdom and Creation*, 235 for whom 12:3-5 refers to the end of civilisation as well as the decline of nature.

¹³⁰² In v 3 we encounter a chiasmatically opposed listing of four classes of people, i.e. the keepers opposed to the strong men and the grinders opposed to the lookers. Cf. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 186. Also Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 324.

¹³⁰³ The verb **[w]** (related to **h[w]**) also occurs in Esth 5:9 and Hab 2:7 and in Biblical Aramaic in Dan 5:19, 6:27 and in the Mishnah (Abot 5:22). Here the language of Qohelet should not be equated with the eschatological language relating to the **hly pyb** in prophetic literature (e.g. Joel 3:4; Zeph 1:14-15).

¹³⁰⁴ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 355 rejects such an allegorical meaning, for in such a case **twm** instead of **[w]** would have been expected. Quite differently, Loader, *Polar Structures*, 131 regards 12:3-4 as an allegory where the entire household serves as a picture for the human body.

¹³⁰⁵ In post-biblical Hebrew **rmw** connotes a “guard,” “watchman,” or “trustee,” while **hrmw** connotes a “guardhouse.” Cf. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 354. This lends support for reading **yrm** as a reference to guards. He also points to the Akkadian expression *bitam našāru*, “to guard / protect the house.”

The description of the “keepers of the house” that tremble coincides with that of the “strong men” (**lyh ym**) that bow (**tw**, Hitp) themselves in 12:3b. Allegorically this image also refers to the limbs that lose their capacity to keep the person upright. In terms of the ruined house metaphor the “strong men”¹³⁰⁶ refer to the guards of the house, possibly identified with the “keepers of the house,” but what motivates them to “bow”¹³⁰⁷ remains a question. They bow as a result of that which is happening, but exactly this remains disputable. Significantly even the “strong men” are overcome with fear, i.e. the opposite of what would be expected.

In 12:3c the grinders (**jf**, **twjfh**, fem pl)¹³⁰⁸ cease¹³⁰⁹ because (**yk**)¹³¹⁰ they have become few (**f[m]**).¹³¹¹ In terms of an allegorical interpretation the grinders refer to the teeth which cease chewing because they have become too few as a result of the process of physical deterioration. If we consider the ruined house metaphor the imagery still pertains to persons and activities in the vicinity of the house. As such they would have become few due to the fact that the house is in a state of ruin and does not function as would be expected. I.e. activity normally associated with the house comes to an end. In this regard it has been suggested that the grinders, probably women, have become few because the rest joined in a passing funeral procession.¹³¹² This interpretation of 12:3-5 as a description of a funerary procession is suggestive, though this theme does not occur in the wider context of this literary unit.¹³¹³ The imagery of 12:3c coincides with that of 12:3d, where the “lookers” (**har**) through the windows (**tvbra**)¹³¹⁴ are described as darkened (**uvj**, Qal pf.). Here the familiar theme of darkness reappears, but within the context of unfamiliar imagery. In terms of an allegorical interpretation the “lookers” refer to the eyes that lose their ability of sight due to the process of physical deterioration. In terms of the ruined house metaphor, the lookers can refer to the indwellers of the house who no longer look outside, either as a result of what has happened or in expectation of what is coming.¹³¹⁵ But in terms of the latter the interpretation of the verb **uvj** is problematic in relation to the “lookers.” For this reason an allegorical interpretation in this instance offers a viable alternative to a more literal interpretation.¹³¹⁶ The imagery of v 3 is governed by the

¹³⁰⁶ Soldiers may be referred to as **lyh ym** while **lyj** indicates wealth or social status.

¹³⁰⁷ In 12:3a [**w**] can mean “convulse,” in view of the parallelism with **tw** (Hitp.), “to bend oneself.”

¹³⁰⁸ Comparable is the Arabic *tahinat* “grinders.”

¹³⁰⁹ The hapax **lfb** is comparable with the Akkadian verb *baʔālu*, that can refer to an interruption of work due to shortage of labour, tools etc. or the stoppage of the delivery of goods. In view of this possible philological correspondence it has been suggested in 12:3 it is the members of the house that has become few, with the result that less food needs to be produced. Cf. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 186.

¹³¹⁰ The suggestion that **yk** here has a demonstrative force, i.e. “thus” is unnecessary. Cf. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 324 for such a view of **yk**.

¹³¹¹ Sawyer, “Ruined House,” 526 suggests the omission of **wf[m yk]**, regarding it as an allegoriser’s gloss.

¹³¹² Fox, *Qohelet and his Contradictions*, 302-3.

¹³¹³ The events of vv 3-5, as indicative of a funeral procession, describe different reactions from people in and around the house to the passing procession. Such an interpretation is challenged by the lack of an object for the Pi, which is translatable as resultative, i.e. the grinders cease “while they are few.” Cf. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 356. Also Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 324.

¹³¹⁴ In the HB **hbra** “window, lattice” occurs in various contexts, e.g. Gen 7:11; 2 Kgs 7:2, 19; Mal 3:11; Isa 60:8. Cf. Gordis, *Kohelet*, 332.

¹³¹⁵ Here the imagery concerns the inhabitants of the house rather than the house as such. Cf. Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 118.

¹³¹⁶ The expression in Lam 5:17; Ps 69:24 that “the eyes grow dim” is indicative of a literary convention used to describe the dashed hope of the “lookers.” Cf. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 356; Fox, *A Time*

temporal phrase **v** **pyb** of 12:3a, i.e. “on the day when,” implying a degree of suddenness. In this sense the effects of physical deterioration are experienced suddenly. But the meaning of v 3 is best located somewhere between metaphor and reality.¹³¹⁷

The imagery of **verse 4** is partially related to that of v 3, since it still concerns the house, but new imagery is also introduced. The continuation of the imagery of v 3 is indicated by the connecting **win** v 4a. The description of the doors (**pytd**) that are closed (**rgs**, Pu)¹³¹⁸ in the street (**qw**) connects the imagery to the house of v 3, but also brings into question the location of the house, as well as the exact meaning of **tld** in this context. It can refer to the doors of the house (e.g. Josh 2:19; Job 31:32) or to city gates (e.g. Deut 3:5; Jer 49:31; Josh 6:26; 1 Sam 23:7; Isa 45:1; Sir 49:13). In this regard the meaning of **qw** also comes into focus, i.e. whether the reference is to a street within a town (e.g. Prov 7:8) or in a rural area. Since **qw** can also be interpreted as marketplace or square (Prov 7:8; Cant 3:2), the scale might be tipped in favour of gates within a city.¹³¹⁹ In v 4b the moment of the described closing is indicated by the particle **b**,¹³²⁰ i.e. “when” the sound (**lw**)¹³²¹ of the mill (**hjf**)¹³²² is low (**lpv**).¹³²³ The reference to the mill connects this imagery with the grinders in v 3. That is, if the image of a ruined house is maintained. The doors will be shut when sudden silence falls upon an otherwise busy and bustling spatial area. The implication is that activities associated with the house, or commercial activities cease within the time-frame of the described events. Here, as in vv 3 and 5 the described events may be regarded as a response to a passing funeral procession. The silence in the residential centrum is the opposite of what is usually associated with it.

In view of its place within the frame of 12:3-5, the precise meaning of the new imagery introduced in 12:4c is elusive. This applies particularly to the subject of the verb **py** (“rise up”) in 12:4c. In terms of the ruined house metaphor the third person masculine singular form refers to an indweller of the house or city, while in terms of an allegorical interpretation it refers to the individual caught in the process of physical deterioration. The subject “he” will rise up at the sound (**lw**) of the bird (**rvpx**, also 9:12). By means of this imagery a specific time is indicated. This coincides, as indicated by the **w** with “all the daughters of song” (**ryh twbAlk**)¹³²⁴ that will be

to Tear Down, 324-25. In Lam 5:17 **wyyl kvj** has the meaning “to become blind with grief.” The use of **uvj** instead of **hhk**, which usually indicates loss of eyesight, suggests that both a physical and emotional process is being described.

¹³¹⁷ Lohfink, *Kohelet*, 84.

¹³¹⁸ The use of the Pual indicates that the doors are the object of active closing, i.e. they are shut during the time-frame of the scene. Cf. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 325.

¹³¹⁹ Here **qw** bears similarities with the Akkadian *suqu* “street,” as an important commercial centre.

¹³²⁰ The preposition **b** in 12:4d has a temporal function and is translatable with “while,” i.e. the doors are closed in the street when the sound of the mill is low.

¹³²¹ The preposition **l** probably calls attention to the sound of the bird, i.e. what happens when the mill grows silent.

¹³²² In the HB **hjf** is a hapax. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 357 points out that in Aramaic papyri from Saqqara **tjt** refers to “commercial mills” runned by hired hands.

¹³²³ For the figurative use of **lpv**, see Prov 16:19. A parallel exists between the word pair **lpv** (“be low”) and **jjv** (“be bowed”) in 12:4.

¹³²⁴ A bird specie known as **hfy twb** does occur in the HB. Cf. Mic 1:8; Isa 13:21, 34:13, 43:20; Jer 50:39; Job 30:29. This points to a relation between the **rvpx** and the **ryh twb**. Cf. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 359; Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 187.

brought low (**jjv**, Ni).¹³²⁵ But the thematic relation of 12:4c and d is not entirely clear.¹³²⁶ In terms of an allegorical interpretation the imagery of 4d is indicative of another symptom of the process of physical deterioration, i.e. the voice becoming high pitched like that of a bird.¹³²⁷ If this interpretation is accepted the aged person can also be considered the subject of **lq**, but since such an aged person has not been mentioned up to this point, it seems an unlikely interpretation.¹³²⁸ Another suggestion for the subject of **lq** is **rvpx** (bird), but this would require reading **lql** as infinitive, i.e. “the bird begins to voice.” This is an unlikely interpretation since **lq** is never used in Biblical Hebrew or Aramaic as infinitive.¹³²⁹ The most probable interpretation is that someone is awakened by the sound of the bird.¹³³⁰

In terms of the ruined house metaphor, the “sound of the birds” presents the eerie sound of e.g. birds of prey, moving into a desolate area after destruction has taken place, i.e. sensing and descending on death.¹³³¹ In this regard the **ryh twb** present an euphemism for birds associated with death and mourning.¹³³² Thus it is at the sound of these birds that the indweller of the ruined house awakes. This interpretation is more tenable than an allegorical interpretation. However, at this stage the possibility of a described funerary and reactions thereto is also worth considering. In this regard the “daughters of song” (**ryh twb**) present “mourning women” or professional “wailers.”¹³³³ This interpretation is sensible if **jjv** is considered to have the meaning “come down low,” i.e. to assume a “mourning posture” by means of prostration. At issue is not the voices of the **ryh twb** that become silent, but rather their physical stance. But within the wider context of 12:2-6, a notion of an eerie silence is quite fitting. Here the suggestion of an approaching storm is applicable, but does not fit the wider context of 12:2-6 and for this reason is not considered. Here the rising sound of the bird amidst this eerie silence is indicative of death.¹³³⁴ Such an argument gains support in view of the imagery employed in 12:5.

The imagery in **verse 5** elaborates on that of v 4, as indicated by the particle **pg** “also.”¹³³⁵ But the meaning of the imagery in v 5 remains elusive. In v 5a both the

¹³²⁵ The 3 masculine plural form of **jjv** “to bring low” poses a difficulty, while the subject **twb** is feminine plural. This can be ascribed to colloquial language. Cf. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 360.

¹³²⁶ In this regard **lq lnyw** i.e. “and the sound decays” has been suggested. But the verb **lq** occurs only twice in the HB (Isa 19:6; 33:9) with the probable root meaning “to be invested” rather than “to fade” or “to grow faint.” Cf. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 358, who refers to the possible relation between the root **lq** and the Ugaritic *ql* “to fall.” Since **lq** is an unlikely subject of **lq**, it remains uncertain.

¹³²⁷ Hertzberg, *Kohelet*, 212.

¹³²⁸ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 357; Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 325.

¹³²⁹ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 358.

¹³³⁰ In v 4 **lpv** and **lq** are contrasted, as well as **shj fh lq** and **rvpxh lq**. Further, the collective noun **rvpxh** and **ryh twb** “the daughters of song” form a parallelism.

¹³³¹ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 358. In Job 38:40 **jjv** is used of a lion crouching in preparation of attacking its prey.

¹³³² Gordis, *Koheleth*, 333 regards **ryh twb** as a possible epithet for “birds.”

¹³³³ Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 304.

¹³³⁴ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 358. He points out that in some Akkadian texts the sound of birds is associated with mourning. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 187 observes the occurrence of the phrase *bnt hll* “daughters of praise” in some Ugaritic texts.

¹³³⁵ The particle **pg** is often used in Qohelet, and may here be translated with “also,” denoting addition. Cf. Schoors, *The Preacher*, 129. Also Loader, *Ecclesiastes*, 131.

subject and root of the form **wry** (third person masculine plural) is disputable.¹³³⁶ The two most tenable possibilities for its form are **ary** “to fear,”¹³³⁷ and **har** “to see.”¹³³⁸ While the root **ary** is favoured by the majority of commentators, the resultant translation “they shall be afraid of high” remains unclear. If the preposition **an** before **hbg** is ascribed the meaning “from,” one can read “from high they shall fear.” They fear because they observe something that leads to fear. This interpretation requires the implied verb **har**, but it is tenable. In terms of the metaphor of the ruined house, this could point to those “keeping watch” from a high place. They fear due to the terrors (**tjtj**) on the way (**urdb**). But this high place does not fit the scene describing the ruined house. Further, the exact nature of the “terrors on the way” cannot not be deduced with certainty from this imagery. In terms of an allegorical interpretation the text is concerned with a “fear of heights” as another symptom of the process of physical deterioration, i.e. actual fear of heights or shortage of breath when ascending. In terms of such an allegorical interpretation the “terrors on the way” are suggestive of another symptom of the process of physical deterioration, namely that one’s environment becomes increasingly hostile. But such a fear, as well as the fear of heights, is not limited to old age and an allegorical interpretation does not fit this imagery. Despite these exegetical difficulties the imagery employed here has the effect of creating an aura of fear.

The imagery of 12:5b-d is further indicative of the ruined house metaphor. This applies particularly to the image of the almond tree (**dqv**)¹³³⁹ that blossoms (**ʾxn** Hi)¹³⁴⁰ and the locust (**bg**) that becomes heavy (**lbs**, Hitp),¹³⁴¹ which is indicative of a neglected garden (cf. Prov 24:31). The locust that becomes heavy is a reference to the locust tree that can no longer uphold its buds.¹³⁴² In this way a state of neglect is portrayed. In terms of an allegorical interpretation the locust that becomes heavy implies a further stage in the process of physical deterioration, i.e. that the limbs of the body lose their vitality and strength. The image of the caperberry (**hnyba**)¹³⁴³ that “frustrates” (**rrp**, Hi)¹³⁴⁴ is difficult to place within the ruined house metaphor. Allegorically the caperberry refers either to an aphrodisiac or stimulant for appetite

¹³³⁶ The **ryh twb** of 12:5 may be taken as the subject of **wry** if it is accepted that the **ryh twb** refers to birds. In this case the text requires no emendation, for **wry** is the only plural in this context. The final **w** of **wry** can be interpreted as dittography, since the next word also begins with a **w**. Cf. Gordis, *Koheleth*, 334.

¹³³⁷ Cf. Barton, *Ecclesiastes*, 189; Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 181; Fox, *Qohelet and his Contradiction*, 280; Hertzberg, *Der Prediger*, 205; Klein, *Kohelet und die Weisheit Israels*, 153; Krüger, *Kohelet*, 338; Lauhe, *Kohelet*, 242; Lohfink, *Kohelet*, 84; Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 112; Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 166.

¹³³⁸ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 347 is one of only few commentators that read **har**.

¹³³⁹ For other occurrences of **dqv** see Gen 43:11; Jer 1:11; Num 17:23.

¹³⁴⁰ An alternative reading is **ʾan** “to reject, despise” instead of **ʾxn** “to blossom.” Cf. Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 113 who allows for both interpretations.

¹³⁴¹ The Hitpael **lbtsy** has the meaning “to burden oneself.” Here an alternative reading **lks** “be confused” instead of **lbs** is not suggestive. Cf. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 187 for this reading.

¹³⁴² Cf. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 362; Seow, “Qohelet’s Eschatological Poem,” 222. Here **bg** may refer to the carob tree whose buds remind of a locust. The Greek **akri** “locust” also refers to plants.

¹³⁴³ In the HB **hnyba** is a hapax, and some interpreted it as reference to an aphrodisiac. Cf. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 188 who refers to this interpretation in the Targum.

¹³⁴⁴ The usual meaning of **rrp** “brake, frustrate, make ineffectual, bring to naught” is problematic in this context. To read **rpt** with the meaning “comes to naught” does not resolve the matter. A form of the stem **hrp** “to bear fruit” can also be read, but here we maintain **rrp**. Cf. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 187 for these alternative suggestions. Another alternative reading for **rrp** is “to fall, drop off” in comparison with the Ugaritic **prr** “to break, break from.” Cf. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 363.

which no longer has the desired effect, resulting in frustration (**rrp**). While neither the ruined house metaphor nor an allegorical interpretation is entirely satisfactory, two images are plausible, namely the continuance of nature, i.e. the trees in the garden, amidst the downfall of human structures, but also death in the botanical realm, namely that the trees in the garden are slowly dying due to neglect.¹³⁴⁵ For this reason the imagery employed by Qohelet contrast the continuance of nature with humanity's demise.¹³⁴⁶ The imagery of death in the botanical realm also supports the experience of death in the human realm. The imagery emphasises the theme of demise and death as central concern.

The theme of death and demise of 12:5a-d is continued in 12:5e, where a reason seems to be given for the imagery described in 12:5a-d by means of the particle **yk**.¹³⁴⁷ As such man (**µda**) is going (**ûlh**) to his eternal home (**wlwf tybAla**),¹³⁴⁸ and in 12:5f the mourners (**dps**) are going about (**bbs**)¹³⁴⁹ in the street (**qw**). The imagery of 12:5e-f recalls that of 12:3-4, where the house, mourning and street are introduced, and as such 12:2-5 is brought to a close. What is alluded to in earlier verses is made explicit in 12:5e-f. The theme of death now takes centre stage by means of this description of the march towards the grave. The **µlw tyb** is the final destination of humankind (**µda**), and the march toward the grave is accompanied by a band of "mourners" (**µdps**, Qal ptc.), announcing the dead passing through the streets. The identity of the deceased, and cause of death, is withheld by means of employing the generic term **µda**. While this might seem to indicate that it is not individual death at issue here, the use of the third person singular suffix in 12:5e makes matters less clear. In terms of the ruined house metaphor the deceased is probably to be associated with the house, while in terms of an allegorical interpretation 12:5e-f describes the end result of the process of physical deterioration.¹³⁵⁰ An eschatological interpretation, reading v 5 as suggestive of the demise of nature as such,¹³⁵¹ which coincides with the death of **µda**, is less

¹³⁴⁵ This imagery, where nature languishes in the face of doom, is in line with literature from the ANE. So e.g. in *KTU* 1:5.II.3-6 where Baal as god of nature and life is swallowed by Mot, the god of death. Cf. Seow, "Qohelet's Eschatological Poem," 223-224. Isa 34:4 contains another description of the death of nature in the HB. The imagery in v 5 is not indicative of the divine warriors march to battle (e.g. Nah 1:4).

¹³⁴⁶ Saywer, "Ruined House," 529.

¹³⁴⁷ Here **yk** actually marks the culmination of a long sentence commencing with 12:2. The previously developed catastrophic scenario in 12:2-5a is now further developed by the description of the funeral of a human being and the mourning by which it is accompanied. Cf. Krüger, *Kohelet*, 355.

¹³⁴⁸ This is the only occurrence of **µlw tyb** in the HB, but the expression was familiar in the context of the ANE. Cf. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 188. He refers to Diodorus Siculus who indicated that the ancient Egyptians referred to their graves as αἰδολοὶ οἰκοί "eternal houses." In Tob 3:6 the phrase **ton aijmion topon** "the eternal place" appears. In the Targum on Isa 14:18 the expression "house of eternity" is found. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 364 points to phrase "he will go over to the house of eternity" from a *Deir 'Alla* inscription, lacking any notion of a possible return from the grave. For related instances in the MT, compare Ps 49:12 (eternal home; dwelling place); Job 17:13 (Sheol as my house), Job 30:23 (house appointed for all living). See further Isa 14:18; Gen 15:2 for the use of **tyb** in reference to the grave. See Tromp, *Primitive Conceptions*, 77-79. Also Wächter, *Der Tod im Alten Testament*, 77 for whom **µlw tyb** serves as an euphemism for death.

¹³⁴⁹ In this context **bbs** may refer to a ritual procession.

¹³⁵⁰ Loader, *Polar Structures*, 131.

¹³⁵¹ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 363. For Perdue, *Wisdom and Creation*, 234 anthropology and cosmology entwine in this literary unit, human deterioration and death eventuates in the decline and death of the cosmos. Thus, the picture presented by the imagery is that of creation in the process of being reversed. But 12:5b refers in the first place to individual death.

tenable.¹³⁵² Such an identification of a cosmic cataclysm is difficult to substantiate. It is significant that while the **plw tyb** characterises the limited nature of human life, no further mention is made of the state of nature, which implies that it continues amidst the presence of human death.¹³⁵³ In nature the hope or potential for continuance remains, while humanity has no hope for return or continuance once they enter the **plw tyb**.¹³⁵⁴ In this way the finite nature of humanity is vividly described.

The temporal clause **alrva dl** introduces a new sequence in the argument of Qohelet in **verse 6**.¹³⁵⁵ It relates to the theme of 12:5e-f, presenting four images depicting the end of human life. This includes the silver cord (**skh lbj**)¹³⁵⁶ that is snapped (**qtr**, Ni), the golden bowl (**bhz tlg**)¹³⁵⁷ that is smashed (**Åxr**), the jar (**dk**) that is broken (**rbv**, Ni) at the well (**[vbm]**,¹³⁵⁸ and the wheel (**lg g**) that is broken (**Åxr**, Ni) at the pit (**rbv**).¹³⁵⁹ It is noticeable that three consecutive imperfects are followed by a perfect.¹³⁶⁰ In this way the bowl broken at the pit is indicative of the final stage of death, coinciding with the “return to dust” in 12:7a (compare Ps 31:13 where death is likened to the breaking of a vessel. Also Jer 22:28). If this imagery is considered within the frame of the ruined house theme, desolation inside and outside the house is at issue, sketching a picture of gloom. In terms of an allegorical interpretation the imagery serves as references to the process of human death, i.e. that human frailty gives way to its inherent nature.¹³⁶¹

It is significant that the imagery employed in 12:6a-c is expected in the context of life rather than the context of death.¹³⁶² As such the “silver cord” in v 6a and the “golden bowl” in v 6b are constituent parts of a lamp, presenting a vehicle of light¹³⁶³ and symbolically of life,¹³⁶⁴ which is destroyed.¹³⁶⁵ This interpretation is tenable, despite

¹³⁵² Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 364. For Perdue, *Wisdom and Creation*, 236 the end of civilisation and the decline of nature is “occasioned by humanities (**pdah**) march toward their eternal home.” In Egyptian literature and post-Biblical Hebrew, “eternal home” expresses the grave.

¹³⁵³ Krüger, *Kohelet*, 355.

¹³⁵⁴ Loretz, *Qohelet und seine Umwelt*, 192. Also Seow, *Qohelet's Eschatological Poem*, 224.

¹³⁵⁵ Perdue, *Wisdom and Creation*, 236. Gordis, *Koheleth*, 337 also argues for the metaphorical description of the advent of death within this verse.

¹³⁵⁶ In HB wisdom literature **lbj** occurs only here and in Job 18:10 as subject. Further Job 36:8; 40:25; Prov 5:22.

¹³⁵⁷ As reference to a basin for oil **hlg** also occurs in Zech 4:2-3 as reference to a golden lamp, while Prov 13:9 uses the image of an extinguished lamp for death (“the lamp of the wicked shall be put out”). Cf. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 188.

¹³⁵⁸ The only two other occurrence of **[vbm]** “spring, fountain” in the HB occur in Isa 35:7 and 49:10.

¹³⁵⁹ In Qohelet **rbv** occurs only here, and has the double meaning of grave and pit. In 9:10 **lvv** is used as reference to the grave.

¹³⁶⁰ Beek, *Prediker / Hooglied*, 131.

¹³⁶¹ In Qohelet as a whole aging and death do not present major concerns. Cf. Saywer, “Ruined House,” 519-531. As such the employed imagery might relate more to metaphor of a ruined house than it does to an allegory of old age. But 11:7-12:8 is a rather independent literary unit, and aging and death cannot be ruled out altogether.

¹³⁶² This imagery is interpreted either as applying to two independent metaphors, namely “lamp” and “well,” or to a single metaphor, namely “well.” The last is preferred by Gordis, *Koheleth*, 338 but identifying a double metaphor is also tenable and opted for in this study.

¹³⁶³ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 364.

¹³⁶⁴ For Beek, *Prediker / Hooglied*, 131 the references to the vessels are symbolic of the light of life. See also 2 Sam 21:17; Job 18:6; 21:17; Prov 13:9.

¹³⁶⁵ But no evidence from the Israelite material culture supports an interpretation that the lamp was hung by a silver cord. Cf. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 365.

the lack of clear evidence from the ancient Israelite material culture. The “silver cord” can have the meaning “cord of life” in this context, but its relation with the “golden bowl” is not clear. If **ʾskh lbj** and **bhzh tlg** are regarded as constituent parts of a lamp, the implication is that the instrument providing light is destroyed in the same way as the instruments needed to draw water, as source of life, from the well. The source of life becomes inaccessible.¹³⁶⁶ The imagery used in reference to the “well / spring” (**lvbm**) in 12:6c is surprising, since it is rather expected in a context of life. This also applies to **rvb** in 12:6d, which here refers to the well, but can also mean “grave.”¹³⁶⁷ Given the ambiguous nature of **rvb**, its use here is aimed at achieving a rhetorical effect. The spring and well present the localities rather than the objects of destruction, since the jar (**dk**) for storing water and wheel (**lgg**) for drawing water¹³⁶⁸ are destroyed. Its application can be ascribed to the achievement of a rhetorical effect, i.e. that death still occurs in 12:6d despite the use of imagery associated with life.¹³⁶⁹ In view of v 5e-f the imagery in v 6 c-d may relate to a funerary custom, but the text only partially supports this interpretation.¹³⁷⁰ In this way the text entails an element of surprise. The imagery employed in 12:6-7 clearly points out the prominence of the theme of death in this literary unit.¹³⁷¹ In terms of a literal reading a funerary custom, related to the theme of the ruined house, provides a background for v 6c-d,¹³⁷² and in terms of an allegorical interpretation the imagery symbolises the end result of human frailty,¹³⁷³ with **uda** returning to its pre-created status of dust.¹³⁷⁴ In both cases the theme of death stands central, and continues in 12:7.

The imagery introduced in v 6 is continued and brought to a close in **verse 7**.¹³⁷⁵ It should not be interpreted as an editorial gloss in view of Qoh 3:21.¹³⁷⁶ This argument

¹³⁶⁶ The life-giving water can no longer be drawn, implying that the end has come. Cf. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 188.

¹³⁶⁷ If **rvb** is interpreted as grave, **lgg** no longer fits the context. Possibly **lgg** is related to **hlg**. This requires the pointing **lgg** (related to **tlgg** ‘skull’), and as such is indicative of a vessel for carrying water rather than a wheel at a well. Lack of archaeological evidence for such lifting devices in Palestine lends support for such an alternative reading, though it requires an emendation of the text. Cf. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 367.

¹³⁶⁸ In v 6d **la** is translated with “at” indicating location. A translation “into” implies that the wheel falls into the well. Seow, “Qohelet’s Eschatological Poem,” 231 suggests that **lgg** should be read as reference to a vessel and in parallel with **dk**. But reading “wheel” does fit the context.

¹³⁶⁹ Loader, *Polar Structures*, 131.

¹³⁷⁰ During such a funerary ritual the sherds of the crushed earthen vessels are cast into the pit, symbolising the return of the body to the ground. Cf. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 366. He also refers to archaeological evidence from the Second Temple period, and a comparable ritual amongst the Jews from North Africa and Persia, where the shattering of the earthen vessel at the burial site symbolises the end of human life. Further, as part of Egyptian mourning customs the breaking of the earthen vessel and the pouring out of water is symbolic for the release of the soul from the physical body for the journey to the underworld. Cf. Seow, “Qohelet’s Eschatological Poem,” 232.

¹³⁷¹ Klein, *Kohelet*, 155. He regards Qoh 12:1b-7 as a **lvbm** and points to the parabolic quality of a **lvbm** “der die Angesprochenen zum Überdenken ihrer Situation und zur Zustimmung zu der in ihm ausgedrückten Wahrheit zu bewegen versucht.”

¹³⁷² Here it is an ironic reference, since the earthenware is crushed at a well, which usually symbolises a place of life. Cf. Prov 5:15.

¹³⁷³ Qoh 12:6 should not too easily be interpreted as another instance where nature’s perpetuation is contrasted with human ephemerality and the futility of human efforts (cf. Qoh 1:4). Cf. Krüger, *Kohelet*, 356 who follows this line of argumentation. This paves the way for an eschatological interpretation, which is not shared in this consideration of the text.

¹³⁷⁴ Cf. Isa 29:16, 64:8; Jer 18:6; Gen 2:4b-7 as instances where YHWH is referred to as divine potter, and humans as the work of His hands.

¹³⁷⁵ For Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Nicht im Menschen*, 230 12:7 forms an inclusion with 12:1.

is unnecessary, particularly if 3:21 is read in the broader context of 3:16-22.¹³⁷⁷ Other than the preceding verses, the theme of v 7 is quite clear. The dust (**rp[**)¹³⁷⁸ of **ḡda** (in view of v 5e) returns (**bw**, iussive) to the earth (**ʾara**), and the spirit (**jw**)¹³⁷⁹ returns (**bw**) to God (**pyhla**)¹³⁸⁰ who gave it.¹³⁸¹ A different sequence of events might have been expected in v 7, with the return to dust following from the return of the **jw** to God (cf. Ps 104:30).¹³⁸² But by means of this sequence of events v 7 picks up the theme of v 6. With death, **ḡda** returns to the earthly elements as it was (**hyhvk**) before being created (cf. Gen 3:19).¹³⁸³ Thus, bereft of its **jw**, humankind returns to dust.¹³⁸⁴ Here Qohelet employs the wider occurring motif in the HB concerning the creation of humankind.¹³⁸⁵ Significant is the reference to the spirit that returns to God. Here God is presented as creator and source of life,¹³⁸⁶ with the closest parallel in the HB being Ps 104:29-30. The return¹³⁸⁷ to dust in 12:7 presents the climax of a central theme in 11:7-12:7, namely the ephemeral nature of humanity.¹³⁸⁸ This latches onto the wider theme of the passing nature of all that exists,¹³⁸⁹ and leads to the proclamation of **lbb** in 12:8.

In v 7 the divine-human relation is brought into focus, and also the relation of **pyhla** with death.¹³⁹⁰ Life stems from **pyhla** (cf. Num 16:22, “God of the spirits of all flesh”). But this implies that **pyhla** also has the right to reclaim the **jw**.¹³⁹¹ In view of

¹³⁷⁶ Cf. Michel, *Qohelet*, 167. Fox, *Qohelet and His Contradictions*, 308 regards 12:7 as constituting a contradiction with 3:21. The contradiction concerns the ascent of the **jw** and a belief in life after death or the rejection of such a belief.

¹³⁷⁷ Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Nicht im Menschen*, 230. He reads 3:21 as a polemic against a *volkstümliche* understanding of the continuity of the individual soul after death, resulting from a Hellenistic influence. In 3:21 Qohelet defends his *carpe diem* motive of 2:24-26, 3:10-15 and 3:22.

¹³⁷⁸ Qoh 3:20 also employs **rp[**, “All go to one place, all are dust and all turn to dust again.”

¹³⁷⁹ For **jw** in Qohelet, cf. 2:17, 26; 4:4, 6, 16; 5:15; 6:9; 7:8, 9; 8:8; 11:5; as subject 1:6; 3:19; 10:4; 12:7 and as object 3:21; 8:8; 11:4. But only seldom does it have the meaning of “life-breath.”

¹³⁸⁰ For **pyhla** (**pyhlah**) in Qohelet cf. 1:13; 2:24, 26; 3:10, 11, 13, 14, 18; 4:17; 5:1, 3, 5, 6, 17, 18, 19; 6:2; 7:13, 14, 18, 26, 29; 8:2, 12, 13, 15, 17; 9:1, 7; 11:5, 9; 12:7, 13, 14. The use of **pyhla** instead of **hyh** in Qohelet and Job is indicative of a “distancing procedure” that keeps far from Israel’s core testimony. Cf. Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 397.

¹³⁸¹ In 12:7 **ʾn** emphasises that even in the face of death, Qohelet regards God as the giver of all gifts, including life. Cf. Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Nicht im Menschen*, 230.

¹³⁸² The creation imagery is reminiscent of the *Menschenschöpfung* tradition (cf. Gen 2:7; 3:19; Job 10:9; Ps 104:29-30), but it is here employed in connection with a reversal of creation. Traditional theologies of creation, providence and redemption are challenged by the absoluteness of death. Cf. Perdue, *Wisdom and Creation*, 236.

¹³⁸³ Klein, *Kohelet*, 156.

¹³⁸⁴ Fox, *Qohelet and His Contradictions*, 308.

¹³⁸⁵ This is indicative of Qohelet’s familiarity with the Torah. Cf. Gordis, *Koheleth*, 338.

¹³⁸⁶ God as creator and source of life is not presented here as redeemer or comforter. Cf. Gordis, *Koheleth*, 339.

¹³⁸⁷ The use of **bw** in 12:7a and 7b confirms death as life’s final end. Cf. Klein, *Kohelet*, 161.

¹³⁸⁸ Perdue, *Wisdom and Creation*, 240.

¹³⁸⁹ In Qoh 1:6 the wind (**jw**) returns to its circuits.

¹³⁹⁰ Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Nicht im Menschen*, 230 interprets Qoh 12:7b as an affirmation that the God of Israel is the God of the living and not of the dead.

¹³⁹¹ Here **jw** is comparable to the **pyj twn** of Gen 2:7. Cf. Brongers, *De Scheppingstradities bij de Profeten*, 100. Also Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 367. For Krüger, *Kohelet*, 356 the **jw** of 12:7 is representative of the *unpersönliche* life-breath. Given the impersonal character of God in Qohelet, this argument is tenable. If this interpretation of the **jw** is maintained, then human mortality for Qohelet is merely part of human creation. Cf. T. Krüger, “Leben und Tod nach Kohelet und Paulus,” in: M. Ebner et al., *Leben trotz Tod* (JBTh 19; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2005), 199.

Qohelet's rhetoric of God (see §4.5.2.1) this should not be interpreted positively as if it indicates trust in the creator. It indicates divine ownership, and as such **pyhla** has a direct interest in the **jw** of humanity.¹³⁹² But this divine ownership and nature of the divine interest does not resolve the question concerning the creator-creation relation, given the incomprehensible character of God in Qohelet.¹³⁹³ The recurring **lbh** theme, which immediately follows v 7, further points away from interpreting the theme of the return of the **jw** to God positively too quickly.¹³⁹⁴ While the return to dust should not be overinterpreted in the context of v 7, it can indicate a play on the theme of human insignificance in the face of divine omnipotence.¹³⁹⁵ But in the first instance the return to dust in 12:7a is a reference to the death of humans (cf. Ps 104:29 and Job 34:14f-15).¹³⁹⁶ For this reason an eschatological interpretation of v 7, i.e. as if the death of the whole creation would here be at issue, is not wishful.¹³⁹⁷ The primary concern is human death, in this context each individual death, which fits within the frame of the broader theme of the ephemeral nature of all that exist.¹³⁹⁸ Thus, the return of the **jw** to God is not indicative of *Jenseits* thinking,¹³⁹⁹ as if life somehow continues after the moment of death, i.e. when the body decays.¹⁴⁰⁰ Neither *Jenseits* nor dualistic thinking is operative in Qohelet.¹⁴⁰¹ In these verses death is presented as the natural

¹³⁹² Here **jw** also denotes the existential dependence of humanity on God. God remains the God of the spirits (**tjw**) of all flesh (cf. Num 16:22; 27:16). Cf. P. Carny, "Theodicy in the Book of Qohelet," in: H. Graf Reventlow and Y. Hoffman (eds.), *In Justice and Righteousness: Biblical Themes and Their Influence* (JSOTSup 137; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992), 71-81 at 79.

¹³⁹³ Here the impression is created that Qohelet's God is "completely indifferent to differentiations in the world," i.e. as distant and apathetic. Cf. Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 395.

¹³⁹⁴ The **jw** that leaves the body does not present an immortal soul, but rather the life-breath that was given by and continues to belong to the creator. Cf. I.J.J. Spangenberg, "Die Prediker se Uitsprake oor en Uitkyk op die Dood." *Scriptura* 27 (1988): 31. In 12:7 it is not merely the body that decays at death while the **jw** lives on. Cf. Loader, *Polar Structures*, 132.

¹³⁹⁵ D.R. Hillers, "Dust: Some Aspects of Old Testament Imagery," in: J.H. Marks and R.M. Good (eds.), *Love and Death in the Ancient Near East: Essays in Honor of Marvin H. Pope* (Guilford, Conn.: Four Quarters, 1987), 105-109. In the HB **rp** as "dust, dirt," with **Åra** as "earth, ground" presents a metaphor for low worth. Since humans are created from **rp**, they remain dust under God's feet. Their substance indicates and reminds of their status before the creator (e.g. Gen 18:27, Job 30:19). That **rp** indicates such status differentiation is plausible in view of Qoh 5:2 ("God is in heaven and you are on the earth"). A particular location, i.e. the underworld can also be indicated by **rp**. Cf. Tromp, *Primitive Conceptions*, 89-91. This is not the case in Qoh 12:7.

¹³⁹⁶ The image of man returning to dust is "suggestive of, and derived from, the association of dirt and dust with death, the grave and the world of the dead." Cf. Hillers, "Dust," 107-109. See also Qoh 3:20; Job 10:9; Ps 103:14-15; Job 33:6; Isa 26:19; Ps 22:30; Dan 12:2; Job 20:11, 21:26; Ps 30:10; Ps 90:3; Ps 146:4. Hillers refers to the Mesopotamian expression "return to dust" (*tāru ana tittī*), i.e. to die, that was well known in wisdom texts and epic literature.

¹³⁹⁷ Cf. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 368; Seow, "Qoheleth's Eschatological Poem," 234.

¹³⁹⁸ D.L. Miller, *The Development of the Concept of Immortality in the Old Testament* (Ph.D. diss.; New York, 1977), 208-209 regards Qoh 12:7 is indicative of the typical ancient Near Eastern concept of immortality (e.g. Ps 16; 17; 49; 73; Job 19; Prov 12:28; 14:32.). But no positive perception of an afterlife is visible in Qohelet.

¹³⁹⁹ Spronk, *Beatific Afterlife*, 272 relates the (preexilic) skepticism of Ps 88:11 concerning the ability of God to raise the dead with the apparent (postexilic) criticism of the notion of the immortality of the soul in Qoh 3:19 and 12:7.

¹⁴⁰⁰ In Isa 26:14 the **pyapr** have a shade like existence in Sheol.

¹⁴⁰¹ Humankind constitutes a body, with the **jw** as an addition that vivifies the body (cf. Ezek 37:8-10, Gen 2:7). Cf. Fox, *Contradictions*, 308. The only possible allusion to dualistic thinking is seen in Qoh 3:21.

end of humanity, but also as final and egalitarian, characterising the distinctiveness of Qohelet's perception of death.¹⁴⁰²

In **verse 8** the **lbb** theme reoccurs and with 1:2 forms an inclusio, enframing the whole of the book.¹⁴⁰³ But, as argued in §4.1 it also provides a fitting conclusion to 11:7-12:8 as literary unit. As such 12:8 qualifies 12:7, adding a dark shade to its apparent neutral colouring. In this way the event of death described in 12:7 should be read in view of the **lbb** claim in 12:8. A claim that is very present in the larger context of 11:7-12:8. While **lbb** literally has the meaning of "air" or "vapour," it further has the implied meaning of "vanity" or "brevity."¹⁴⁰⁴ In the HB **lbb** can also be used to express the notion of something that is ephemeral or insubstantial, and may apply to humanity, life, words, deeds, thoughts, ability and of foreign gods etc.¹⁴⁰⁵ Further, **lbb** can describe that which is "incomprehensible."¹⁴⁰⁶ From this follows the proposed meaning of "senselessness" or "absurdity" for **lbb** in 12:8.¹⁴⁰⁷ Such a translation encompasses some of the more general connotations of **lbb**. Particularly in a topsy-turvy world,¹⁴⁰⁸ of which the framework of its meaning giving system has collapsed, resulting in the impossibility of sure knowledge.¹⁴⁰⁹ Thus, within the framework of wisdom, everything is absurd.¹⁴¹⁰ This notion of "absurdity" fits the wider context of the book of Qohelet (cf. 1:2), yet here the notion of "vanity" is maintained, given that it is the fleeting nature of life that is at issue in 11:7-12:8, with humanity "hurrying" toward the grave. The notion of "absurdity" (1:2) and "vanity" (12:8) serves as a guide for comprehending other uses of **lbb** in Qohelet.¹⁴¹¹ In Qohelet, **lbb** is not used of God or the world in general, but specifically in reference to human existence and

¹⁴⁰² Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 162 identifies no negative tone, seeing this presentation of death as the mere cessation of life.

¹⁴⁰³ Of the 73 occurrences of **lbb** in the HB, 38 are found in Qohelet. It is a *Leitmotif* in Qohelet. Cf. Michel, *Untersuchungen*, 42. The **lbb** theme introduced in 1:2 is further elaborated in the rest of the book, culminating in 12:8. Cf. D.B. Miller, "Qohelet's Symbolic use of **lbb**," *JBL* 117 (1998): 437.

¹⁴⁰⁴ G.S. Ogden, "'Vanity' it certainly is Not," *BT* 38 (1987): 301-307. He translates **lbb** in Qohelet as "enigma" or "mystery." Such a translation does not exclude notions pertaining to "breath / air," since everything is as breath, i.e. fleeting. Ogden regards the use of **lbb** in Qohelet as descriptive of enigmatic situations where the working out of divine justice (**qdx**) is incomprehensible. The absence of justice in a world created by **pyhlah** renders everything **lbb**.

¹⁴⁰⁵ Michel, *Untersuchungen*, 41-42.

¹⁴⁰⁶ Murphy, *On Translating Ecclesiastes*, 573. Yet he translates **lbb** as "vanity" in his commentary. Cf. Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 112. He suggests that Fox's categories of "irrational / rational" does not fit within Qohelet's thought, and suggests that the nuance of **lbb** lies in the categories "know / not know."

¹⁴⁰⁷ Michel, *Untersuchungen*, 51, 280; Also M.V. Fox, "The Meaning of Hebel for Qohelet," *JBL* 105 (1986): 409. Both draw from the work of Camus concerning the "absurd," which is related in Qohelet with the notion of the irrational.

¹⁴⁰⁸ The experience of the world as a volatile place, leading to the notion of the brevity of life, is also encountered in *Ludlul Bēl Nēmeqi* Tablet 2 where we read,

"He who was alive yesterday is dead today:

One moment he is worried, the next he is boisterous.

One moment he is singing a joyful song,

A moment later he wails like a professional mourner" (*ANET*, 3d ed.; 597)

The **lbb** theme has a pre-history and is not purely the result of Qohelet's ingenuity.

¹⁴⁰⁹ A. Schellenberg, *Erkenntnis als Problem: Qohelet und die alttestamentliche Diskussion um das menschliche Erkennen* (OBO; Freiburg: Universitätsverlag / Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2002).

¹⁴¹⁰ Miller, "Qohelet's Symbolic use of **lbb**," 443 regards **lbb** in Qohelet as "a symbol by which to represent the entirety of human experience."

¹⁴¹¹ Idem, 440.

human experience of earthly realities.¹⁴¹² This also applies to **lbh** in 12:8. In this way **lbh** is related more to Qohelet's anthropology than his cosmology.¹⁴¹³ Significant in 12:8b is the qualification of **lbh** by **lk** ("all").¹⁴¹⁴ I.e., everything related to human existence and human effort is characterised as **lbh**. The certainty and finality of death contributes to the **pyl****lbh** **lbh** declaration of 12:8a. In 12:8b **lk** includes the **jw** of 12:7b, which returns to **pyhlah** at the moment of death.¹⁴¹⁵ The further implications will be considered in the next section.

4.5 Thematic Discussion

In this section the function and relation of creation and death as theological themes in Qoh 11:7-12:8 is considered more closely, in order to determine to what extent the creation theology operative in Qohelet offers a paradigm for interpreting the theme of death.

4.5.1 The Context of Qohelet

Due to the lack of any concrete historical references within the book of Qohelet, arguments concerning its historical context and social setting are for the most part adduced from silence.¹⁴¹⁶ But Qohelet is not *übergeschichtlich* and its interpretation requires a context. Most scholars agree that Qohelet should be dated to the postexilic period.¹⁴¹⁷ In this regard 200 BCE seems a reasonable *terminus ante quem*, given Ben Sirah's familiarity with the Qohelet material, the Qohelet fragments found in cave IV at Qumran, and the absence of any clear reference to the events surrounding the Maccabean revolt of 164 BCE.¹⁴¹⁸ The two most likely contexts for Qohelet are the Persian or Ptolemaic periods. Arguments in favour of a Persian context includes the occurrence of Persian loanwords (cf. **sdrp**, 2:5 and **pgtp**, 8:11; also Esth 1:20), some Aramaisms,¹⁴¹⁹ its distinct grammar¹⁴²⁰ and the economic language of the book.¹⁴²¹

¹⁴¹² Lohfink, *Koheleth*, 201-216. Also Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 102. Three referents of **lbh** in Qohelet have been identified, namely "insubstantiality" (expectation vs. reality), "transience" (things that are transient and pass away quickly) and "foulness" (an evaluative term for things that in his experience is fundamentally foul). Cf. Miller, "Qohelet's symbolic use of **lbh**," 443-452. Thus, **lbh** as "vapour" holds together a set of meanings that cannot be adequately expressed by any single meaning.

¹⁴¹³ N. Lohfink, "Ist Qohelets **lbh**-Aussage erkenntnistheoretisch gemeint?," in: A. Schoors (ed.), *Qohelet in the Context of Wisdom* (BETL 136; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1988) 41-59 regards the **lbh** statements in Qohelet as anthropological in their focus.

¹⁴¹⁴ Here **lk** might anticipate **lml** **lkb**, implying that human efforts in particular are **lbh** and not everything known to humanity. But here **lbh** has a general application.

¹⁴¹⁵ In 12:8 **lbh** further indicates that everything comes to an end with death and that the return of the **jw** to God does not point to an immortal soul. Cf. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 189.

¹⁴¹⁶ Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, xix.

¹⁴¹⁷ For a different view see e.g. T.A. Perry, *Dialogues with Kohelet: The Book of Ecclesiastes* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993) who retains the traditional Jewish dating, seeing the book as Solomonic. Also D.C. Fredericks, *Qohelet's Language: Re-evaluating its Nature and Date* (Lewiston: Mellen Press, 1988), 263 who dates the book to the 8th or 7th century BCE on linguistic grounds. Also I.M. Young, *Diversity in Pre-Exilic Hebrew* (Tübingen: Paul Siebeck, 1993), 140-156.

¹⁴¹⁸ Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, xxii. Thus, the Seleucid period (ca. 201-142 BCE) seems too late.

¹⁴¹⁹ Delsman, *Die Datierung*, 169-174, 298 discusses possible Aramaisms in the book and dates Qohelet to the Ptolomaic period.

Linguistic evidence in search of a context for Qohelet is ambiguous.¹⁴²² Analysis of Qohelet's language may also support a setting in the Ptolemaic period (ca 301-198 BCE).¹⁴²³ This period, particularly the second half of the third century BCE, has become a preferred historical setting for Qohelet.¹⁴²⁴ This also applies to the argument based on the use of economic language,¹⁴²⁵ since the Ptolemaic period witnessed Palestine's incorporation into the cosmopolitan world, which introduced new methods of production and stimulated international trade and commerce.¹⁴²⁶

It is perhaps remarkable that Qohelet is not indicative of an apparent polemic against foreign deities or religious influence.¹⁴²⁷ Confronted with a changing socio-political environment, the opposite could have been expected, seeing the inevitable exposure to Hellenistic religious and philosophical ideas.¹⁴²⁸ But this could be indicative of Qohelet's audience¹⁴²⁹ and social location, e.g. whether he was writing from within a plebeian¹⁴³⁰ or aristocratic¹⁴³¹ circle. The absence of such indications points out that

¹⁴²⁰ E.g. the *qotelet* vocal pattern in the name **tlhq**, which is also seen in names occurring in other texts from the Persian period, e.g. **trpsh** (Ezra 2:55, Neh 7:57) and **trkp** (Ezra 2:57, Neh 7:59). Cf. C.L. Seow, "Linguistic Evidence and the Dating of Qohelet," *JBL* 115 (1996): 665.

¹⁴²¹ Seow, "Linguistic Evidence and the Dating of Qohelet," 665-666 dates Qohelet to the Persian period (2nd half of the 5th to the 1st half of the 4th century BCE). Also Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 21. J.L. Kugel, "Qohelet and Money," *CBQ* 51 (1989): 23-49 argues for a similar setting (5th to early or middle 4th BCE). This economic language include the terms **arty ūlj**, **¹k** ("measure"), **¹pj** ("handful"), **hjf** ("mill"), **pyrwh tyb** ("prison") etc.

¹⁴²² Delsman, *Die Datierung*, 80. On the basis of his linguistic study of Qohelet, he draws the conclusion that there are no convincing hints in the book that allows for a certain dating or socio-historical placement. For Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, 9-11, 15 the language of Qohelet should not be used as a "barometer" for determining its origin.

¹⁴²³ Delsman, *Die Datierung*, 298.

¹⁴²⁴ Krüger, *Kohelet*, 39, 44. In such a setting Qohelet indicates, "wie Traditionen und Konzepte der israelitisch-jüdischen Kultur in Anbetracht neuer Erfahrungen und nach Maßgabe neuer Fragestellungen und Deutungsperspektiven in hellenistischer Zeit rezipiert und transformiert werden konnten." For this dating see also Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 50, given Qohelet's attitude toward rulers; For T. Frydrych, *Living under the Sun: Examinations of Proverbs and Qoheleth* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 211 the world of Qohelet is that of "large empires" in which only the rich benefit from the produce of the land. Cf. also Gordis, *Koheleth*, 68, 77; Loader, *Ecclesiastes*, 3; Michel, *Qohelet*, 114; Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, xxi. Others such as Lauha, *Kohelet*, 3 and Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 15-22 refer to a late postexilic though pre-Maccabean dating.

¹⁴²⁵ Given the continuance of the Persian Satrapial system (to which Qoh 8 might refer) by Alexander the Great and his successors, Barton, *Ecclesiastes*, 59 dated Qohelet to the late third, early second century BCE.

¹⁴²⁶ Cf. Whybray, "The Social World," 243. Seow, "Theology when Everything is out of Control," 241 employs a similar argument but in favour of the Persian period with its lively economic environment and the monetary change that it brought about. Comparable is the fifth century BCE Jerusalem under the administration of Nehemia (3:15-16), and the volatility of the economy and the vulnerability of ordinary citizens (Neh 5:3-5) brought about by Persian taxation. Qoh 4:12-13 might reflect some of the realities of the Persian period, accounting for the argument of Qoh 9:11-12 that there are no guarantees in life.

¹⁴²⁷ Seow, "Theology when Everything is out of Control," 238-239.

¹⁴²⁸ Cf. R. Braun, *Kohelet und die frühhellenistische Popularphilosophie* (BZAW 130; Berlin: De Gruyter, 1973).

¹⁴²⁹ Qohelet's strict monotheism, as well as the lack of any polemic against competing views, is indicative of Qohelet's perception of his audience's monotheistic perspective. Cf. Frydrych, *Living Under the Sun*, 108.

¹⁴³⁰ For Finkelstein, *The Pharisees*, 235-237 the thought and style of Qohelet reflects the ideals of the sceptical and cynical plebeian school (in his view also Job). But Finkelstein seems to contradict himself, arguing that "The writer's weariness and his contempt for affluence are in fact characteristic

exposure does not have to be equated to direct influence¹⁴³² or the integration of Jewish and Hellenistic ideas. For in Qohelet Proverbial wisdom is set within a new context, functioning differently and attributed new meaning. For this reason a correspondence in themes and rhetorical styles should not too easily be equated with assimilation.¹⁴³³ In this regard Qohelet is very much a work of Jewish origin that evolved within a Hellenistic environment.¹⁴³⁴

4.5.2 Creation as a Theological Theme in Qohelet 11:7-12:8

In this section the place and function of creation as a theological theme in Qoh 11:7-12:8 is considered. This will be done within the broader parameters of Qohelet's rhetoric of the deity (§4.5.3.1), the deity as creator (§4.5.3.1.1) and creation (§4.5.3.2).

4.5.2.1 The Rhetoric of God in Qohelet

The centrality of the deity in Qohelet's reasoning is explicated by the numerous occurrences of **pyhla**.¹⁴³⁵ But how the designations of God in Qohelet are to be understood, and whether they convey a special understanding within their contexts is debatable.¹⁴³⁶ Particularly in view of the persistent impersonal designation of the deity as **pyhlah** i.e. "the God."¹⁴³⁷ Indeed, the deity is never addressed directly in

not of the aging rich, but rather of the philosopher's vision of them." (236). Patrician and pietist outlooks are criticised by Qohelet.

¹⁴³¹ For Whybray, "The Social World," 242 Qohelet and its readership belong to the privileged class of society (cf. 7:21), given that Qohelet takes for granted the possession of wealth and the possibility of a leisured existence. Also Barton, *Ecclesiastes*, 62-65 for whom Qohelet is part of the "wealthy skeptical aristocracy" out of which the Sadducees eventually developed. Further Gordis, *Koheleth*, 68, 77. For Crüsemann, *Die unveränderbare Welt*, 55-57 Qohelet reflects the alienation of the elite, functioning as agents of foreign overlords, from the rest of the people.

¹⁴³² E.g. the absence of a clear body / soul dualism. Qoh 12:7 is not indicative of an immortality soul verses the mortality of the flesh. The return of the **jw** to **pyhlah** implies that it ceases to exist.

¹⁴³³ Clements, *Wisdom in Theology*, 90.

¹⁴³⁴ For van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible*, 101, 109, 116 both Qohelet and Ben Sira were immersed in proverb collections and adopted the format of maxims for large parts of their own writings. In this sense its rhetorical style reflects its compositional context. He also regards Qoh 12:12 as indicative of a scribal audience, and as such suggestive of Qohelet's *Sitz im Leben*. Also D. Rudman, *Determinism in the Book of Ecclesiastes* (JSOTSup 316; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 21-22.

¹⁴³⁵ For **pyhla** in Qohelet cf. 2:24, 26; 3:13, 18; 4:17; 5:1, 3, 18; 7:13, 18, 26; 8:2, 12, 13, 17; 9:1; 11:5; 12:7 (object); 1:13; 3:10, 11, 14 (x 2), 15, 17; 5:1, 5, 17, 18, 19; 6:2 (x 2); 7:14, 29; 8:15; 9:7; 11:9; 12:14 (subject). Also Schoors, "Words Typical of Qohelet," 39. He interprets the frequent occurrence of **pyhla** as indicative of a component of theodicy in Qohelet. But theodicy is not a central theme in Qohelet. Since Qohelet does not even offer a theoretical solution to the problem of theodicy, one might conclude that he simply does not have a theodicy. See here A. Schoors, "Theodicy in Qohelet," in: A. Laato and J.C. de Moor (eds.), *Theodicy in the World of the Bible* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 375-409, at 403.

¹⁴³⁶ Crenshaw, "The Concept of God," 8-9 identifies no such special understanding. Also Perdue, *Wisdom and Cult*, 137. The HB wisdom literature contains no special metaphors for God, but one of its most significant characteristics is the theological affirmation that God is the creator who established an order that permeates all of creation, including society.

¹⁴³⁷ The only divine name in Qohelet is **pyhlah**, with no occurrence of **hwy**. This is significant for Qohelet's theology, but the use of the more generic **pyhla** in later texts is not uncommon. Throughout

Qohelet.¹⁴³⁸ This raises questions concerning the perceived creator-creation relation.¹⁴³⁹ The impersonal nature of the rhetoric of God has led to the argument that this deity (**pyhlah**) is not the same God encountered in the wider context of the HB.¹⁴⁴⁰ But such an argument for the “otherness” of God in Qohelet’s rhetoric is not sufficient reason to argue for His “foreignness.”¹⁴⁴¹ For most of Qohelet’s postulates concerning God are not foreign to the HB.¹⁴⁴² This includes the postulate of God as creator, i.e. as giver and possessor of all life,¹⁴⁴³ which is concretised particularly in Qoh 11:7-12:8. In this literary unit the deity (**pyhla**) is referred to as creator (12:1a), and the possessor of the **jw**, to whom it will return at the moment of death (12:7b). Qoh 11:9b is reflective of the deity’s concern and involvement with creation, as stipulated by a reference to the judgment (**fpvm**) of God over human activity.¹⁴⁴⁴ Further, in Qoh 11:7-12:8 youth and old age are weighed against each other, and God is ascribed a central place in both phases of existence.

The depiction of the deity as creator in Qoh 11:7-12:8 is peculiar within the broader parameters of the book, in which God remains the *Deus absconditus*, the maker of a problematic world.¹⁴⁴⁵ The divine works (**hc[m]**) are as incomprehensible as the deity (cf. Qoh 3:11; 8:17; 11:5).¹⁴⁴⁶ This perception of God as remote and unknowable, and

the LXX translates **pyhla** with **qeo~ / o qeo~**, and the Vulgate reads *Deus*. The Peshitta translates the 39 occurrences of **pyhla** with *māryā*’ (x 16) and *’alāhā*’ (x 23). Cf. R.B. Salters, “The Word for God in the Peshitta of Koheleth.” *VT* 21 (1971): 251-54. In his view *māryā*’ could be attributed to a later editor, conscious of the absence of the *tetragrammaton*. In the Targum of Qohelet, **pyhla** is consistently (but for two exceptions) rendered **hwy** since **pyhla** might have become a “too remote and general term for Judaism.” The persistent use of **pyhlah** has led to the argument that Qohelet “denationalises” the concept of God. Cf. M. Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism* (London: SCM, 1974), 117. This argument is supported by Qohelet’s lack of interest in historical matters.

¹⁴³⁸ Burkes, *God, Self and Death*, 82. God is present only on the fringes of Qohelet’s rational argument. Cf. Backhaus, *Zeit und Zufall*, 382; Schoors, “Theodicy in Qohelet,” 407.

¹⁴³⁹ H.P. Müller, “Wie sprach Qohälät von Gott.” *VT* 18 (1968): 507-521.

¹⁴⁴⁰ Whybray, “Qohelet as a Theologian,” 246-247. This view is explicated in the argument of Lauha, *Kohelet*, 17 for whom Qohelet’s God “ist nicht der Gott des israelitischen Glaubens: das Verhältnis des Menschen zu Gott ist bei ihm anders als allgemein im Alten Testament. Kohelet kennt jenen Gott nicht...” For Schubert, *Schöpfungstheologie*, 82-83 the God of Qohelet “...ist ein aus freier, selbstgewählter und niemand zur Rechenschaft verpflichteter Entscheidung handelnder Gott.”

¹⁴⁴¹ For Frydrych, *Living Under the Sun*, 108-109 the use of **pyhla** instead of **hwy** indicates that Qohelet’s main objective was not to determine who the deity is, but what the deity is like. Qohelet did not promote **hwy** as universal deity, since his was not required by his theological environment.

¹⁴⁴² R.E. Murphy, “The sage in Ecclesiastes and Qoheleth the sage,” in J.G. Gammie and L.G. Perdue (eds.), *The Sage in Israel and the Ancient Near East* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 263-271 at 269. In particular three affirmations of God as creator in Proverbial wisdom also occur in Qohelet, namely 1) God governs long term (Qoh 3:14-15, 5:2, 12:7); 2) It is this God that judges all (Qoh 2:26, 3:17, 5:6, 7:26, 8:13-14, 11, 12:14); 3) God gives and is the sole provider (Qoh 2:24, 5:18-20, 6:2, 8:15, 9:7). Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 393-394, ascribes these affirmations to Israel’s “core testimony.” The affirmation of divine judgment is problematic in Qohelet. It has to eventuate in this life, but Qohelet does not perceive any justice under the sun.

¹⁴⁴³ The predominant metaphor for God in HB wisdom literature is that of creator. Cf. Zimmerli, “The Place and Limit of the Wisdom,” 148.

¹⁴⁴⁴ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 54, 59 identifies a “theology from below” in Qohelet, i.e. when Qohelet is referring to humanity he is indeed speaking about God.

¹⁴⁴⁵ Schoors, “God in Qohelet,” 270; Schoors, “Theodicy in Qohelet,” 409.

¹⁴⁴⁶ J.L. Crenshaw, *A Whirlpool of Torment: Israelite Traditions of God as an Oppressive Presence* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 75. Qohelet no longer seeks to establish any kind of dialogue with the deity, who is distant and not to be found in human experience.

the envisioned distance between God and humanity (5:2),¹⁴⁴⁷ does not result in a designation of God as “terrible.”¹⁴⁴⁸ But the deity is to be feared.¹⁴⁴⁹ This notion relates to the imperative of 12:1a to “remember (**rkz**) your creator,” which could carry the connotation of “fear” rather than “reverence” (**hly tary**, cf. Prov 1:7) for the deity.¹⁴⁵⁰ The implication is that humanity should remain aware of its ambiguous relation with the creator,¹⁴⁵¹ as suggested in Qoh 5:2.¹⁴⁵² In a very real sense Qohelet perceives **pylah** as *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. As such, a neglect to fear God is folly, despite the fact that it offers no guarantees (Qoh 8:11-14).¹⁴⁵³ Thus, the call to “remember” / “fear” the creator is motivated by the incomprehensibility of the deity¹⁴⁵⁴ rather than the causality principle.

While God is persistently portrayed as incomprehensible, the deity is also consistently perceived as the God of life. As such the origin and destination the **jw** is ascribed to **pyhla** (12:7b). This implies that God is present in life’s moments of origin and cessation. However, during the course of life the divine presence and activity remains ambiguous, if not impossible to comprehend (3:11). This also brings into question the continued relation of the **jw** and **pylah**. Qohelet’s rhetoric of the deity leads to a complex and at time contradictory profile sketch. But the deity is not excluded from life’s moments of creation and death.

4.5.2.1.1 Creation Theology in Qohelet

The book of Qohelet represents a creation theology “at its most formal and formidable,” depicting God as the creator whose sovereignty cannot be challenged.¹⁴⁵⁵ It simultaneously lacks traditional creation theology,¹⁴⁵⁶ since no divine acts of

¹⁴⁴⁷ For Schmid, “Himmels-gott, Weltgott und Schöpfer,” 124 Qohelet questions the distanceless nature of the divine-human relation, and interaction with God (cf. Qoh 5:2).

¹⁴⁴⁸ God is never called “terrible” (**arw**, cf. Exod 15:11; Deut 7:21; Neh 1:5), but at times Qohelet seems to be aiming at this, depicting God as sovereign despot, accountable to no-one. Cf. Frydrych, *Living Under the Sun*, 110-111.

¹⁴⁴⁹ In Qohelet the phrase **hly tary** is not employed, but the notion of “fearing God” is identifiable in Qoh 3:14, 5:6, 7:18 and 8:12-13; 12:13. Cf. also Frydrych, *Living Under the Sun*, 110-111. Unlike Prov 18:10 the “name of YHWH” (**hly mv**) is not perceived as a stronghold for the righteous (**qydx**).

¹⁴⁵⁰ Perdue, *Wisdom and Creation*, 234. For Boström, *The God of the Sages*, 187 this notion of “fear” in Qohelet implies a correct attitude. Also Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 57-59 who argues that in Qohelet, the one who fears is the one who is aware of the distance between God and humanity. Humanity must live with an awareness of its place in relation to God.

¹⁴⁵¹ The concept “fear” characterises the divine-human relation in Qohelet. Cf. Sacchi, *The History of the Second Temple Period*, 199-200.

¹⁴⁵² For Schmid, “Himmels-gott, Weltgott und Schöpfer,” 124 Qoh 5:2 stresses the incomprehensible nature of God, but also the divine power, which is another reason why God should be feared.

¹⁴⁵³ Schubert, *Schöpfungstheologie*, 82-83.

¹⁴⁵⁴ Qohelet cannot observe and does not experience anything indicative of divine favour toward creation. Cf. Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom*, 116. In part this results from Qohelet’s negative estimation of wisdom’s worth (cf. 8:16-9:6).

¹⁴⁵⁵ For Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 393 this is part of Qohelet’s “counter-testimony.”

¹⁴⁵⁶ Perdue, *Wisdom and Creation*, 210. Hillers, “Dust,” 109. The imagery in Qoh 12:2-6 does not reflect a world that is familiar, intelligible and stable.

creation or sustenance are explicitly mentioned.¹⁴⁵⁷ Yet the notion of God as creator provides an invariable in Qohelet.¹⁴⁵⁸

Explicit references to divine acts of creation are absent in Qohelet,¹⁴⁵⁹ but it does contain various references to the works (**hc[m/ hc[nh]**) of God (cf. 3:11; 7:13; 11:5; also Ps 19:2; Job 10:3-11; 34:19).¹⁴⁶⁰ Indeed, **pyhla** is depicted as the one who makes all (**lkhta hc[y** 11:5). For this reason a sparsity of references to divine acts of creation is not indicative of creation's insignificance as theological theme in Qohelet.¹⁴⁶¹ While traditional creation theology is lacking in Qohelet, he does utilise imagery and motifs encountered in earlier creation traditions of the HB, but with a different theological intent,¹⁴⁶² suiting his rhetorical purpose. Earlier creation traditions are re-evaluated and re-interpreted to fit within the framework of his epistemology, resulting in his distinct theology. This includes a strictly monotheistic view of the deity, which provides the basis for his rhetoric of God as creator. It is not unique, but is peculiar to Qohelet. The creation rhetoric of Qohelet includes no reference to God "speaking" (**pyhla rmayw** creation into being as in Gen 1:1-2:4a, nor any reference to God "interacting" with humanity as in Gen 2:4b-3:24 (3:9).¹⁴⁶³ In this sense the creator God in Qohelet, present at life's moments of creation and death, remains a very distant God (**pyhlah**).

Also absent in Qohelet's creation theology is the notion of humanity being created in the image of God (**pyhla plxb wlxh**, cf. Gen 1:26-27).¹⁴⁶⁴ While this notion is specific to Genesis 1-11, its absence in Qohelet is pertinent. In 7:29 Qohelet does affirm that **pyhla** made humankind (**pdah**) upright (**rvy**). But humans, rather than the creator, are to be blamed for their corrupt nature, seeking many "inventions" (**abvj**). Qohelet's creation theology also lacks the divine imperative that humans should have dominion (**hdr**) over, or to subdue (**vbk**) creation (cf. Gen 1:28).¹⁴⁶⁵ This is indicative of Qohelet's low estimation of humanity¹⁴⁶⁶ and reflects his perception of the divine-human relation, further affirming the distance between creator and creation. Qohelet

¹⁴⁵⁷ Qohelet does employ terminology in relation to creation, e.g. **nyarw** (12:1a), **hc[** (3:11; 7:13, 29; 11:5), **tn** (1:13; 3:10; 5:19; 6:2; 9:9), **dy** (2:24; 9:1), **var** (2:14; 3:11; 9:8), **drq** (5:3f), **fpv** (3:17), **ary** (3:14; 5:6; 7:18; 8:12), **ulh** (4:17), **lv** (8:2). Cf. Schubert, *Schöpfungstheologie*, 84-105.

¹⁴⁵⁸ In the HB wisdom tradition the acknowledgement of God as creator serves as the orientation point for a well-lived life within the world ordered by God, but in Qohelet this acknowledgement does not have the desired effect. Cf. Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 397.

¹⁴⁵⁹ The verbs **hc[** and **tn** are employed in reference to God's actions, but never in reference to a particular act of creation. Cf. Schubert, *Schöpfungstheologie*, 84-105.

¹⁴⁶⁰ In Qohelet **hc[m** also refers to human work. Cf. Qoh 2:11; 3:22; 4:4; 8:9, 11, 14 (x2). Further 2:17; 9:10 (subject) and 1:14; 2:4; 4:3; 5:5; 8:17; 9:7; 12:14 (object).

¹⁴⁶¹ The reference to God as creator in 12:1a emphasises creation as an ever present theological theme in Qohelet. Cf. Schubert, *Schöpfungstheologie*, 98.

¹⁴⁶² Imagery from Gen 1:1-2:4a and Gen 2:4b-24, and to a lesser extent the prophetic tradition is reflected in Qohelet. In this regard the term "familiarity" is preferred above "dependence."

¹⁴⁶³ Given the distance between God and creation in Qohelet, God cannot be considered as redeemer. Cf. Perdue, *Wisdom and Creation*, 234. The addressee of 12:1a should remember his creator, without certainty that the creator will remember His creation.

¹⁴⁶⁴ Contra Gen 1:26 "let us make man in our image" (**wlxh pda hc[n**). Qoh 7:29 states that God made man (**pda**) upright (**rvy**), but this qualification is given a negative twist, since humanity seeks many "inventions" (**abvj**) that brings their "upright" created state into question.

¹⁴⁶⁵ Humanity's elevated status in creation is also challenged in Job 38-41.

¹⁴⁶⁶ Cf. Qohelet's equation of humanity and beasts (3:19), their basic status as dust (3:20; 12:7) and the hierarchical relation between God and humanity (5:2).

affirms that God made everything beautiful (**hpy**) in its time (**wt[b]**) in 3:11,¹⁴⁶⁷ but creation does not enjoy the blessing of the creator (**urb**, Gen 1:31). This positive note in Qohelet's creation rhetoric is immediately qualified in 3:11, since this time (**t[]**) cannot be known.¹⁴⁶⁸ As such the beauty of the divine works becomes useless in terms of Qohelet's epistemology.¹⁴⁶⁹ While Qoh 3:2-8 seems to support the notion of creation as divinely ordered, as exemplified in Gen 1:1-2:4a with God "separating" (**lydbh**), this created order loses its beneficence since it is inaccessible to human reason (3:11). For this reason humanity has no profit (**arty**) from the knowledge that God is responsible for creation and that He has established an order in it.¹⁴⁷⁰ For Qohelet, God is the creator of a problematic world, in which no certainty other than death is to be found. While Qohelet's rhetoric of God as creator cannot be judged as positive,¹⁴⁷¹ he never disputes God as creator. With death, it presents the only other certainty in the book of Qohelet.¹⁴⁷²

It is particularly striking that no connection is made in Qohelet between wisdom (**hmkj**) and divine creation, at least not in the sense of Prov 8:22-23, where wisdom is present with God at the beginning (**tyar**), even before creation ("from everlasting," **plwm**).¹⁴⁷³ An identification of wisdom with the divine works and the positive evaluation of such a connection between divine works and wisdom as in Ps 104:24 (**tyc[hmkjb plk**, "in wisdom you have made them all") is also absent in Qohelet. This disjunction of wisdom and divine creation in Qohelet should be evaluated in terms of his general debunking of wisdom's value.¹⁴⁷⁴ Nevertheless, God as creator remains a leading motif in Qohelet's rhetoric.¹⁴⁷⁵ A ramification of Qohelet's view of wisdom as depotentiated is that God, as creator, has become inaccessible to human reason. The divine designs for the world are irrevocable and inscrutable. God remains the controlling entity in human life situations. This presents a vexing aspect of Qohelet's

¹⁴⁶⁷ Creation's beauty or appropriateness receives an aesthetic value rather than moral judgment in Qohelet. This aesthetic value is limited by the qualification **wt[b]** "in its time" (3:11). Cf. Crenshaw, *A Whirlpool of Torment*, 82. The beauty in creation is further qualified in Qoh 7:20, 29 stating that creation is spoiled on account of humanity. Dearman, *Religion and Culture*, 224 sees a connection with the prayer of Solomon in his dedication of the temple (1 Kgs 8:46).

¹⁴⁶⁸ Perdue, *Wisdom and Creation*, 239, 241. As such it is no longer possible to live in harmony with the divinely established created order.

¹⁴⁶⁹ This undermining of creation's beauty results from wisdom's failure as epistemological tool. Wisdom provides no absolute insight into the works of the creator. Other than the book of Job, wisdom's worth is not restored in Qohelet by means of divine intervention (Job 38-41). Rather, divine silence persists, as does Qohelet's questioning.

¹⁴⁷⁰ In Qohelet humanity stands powerless in creation and before the creator. Cf. Crenshaw, "The Concept of God," 14-15. Given God's perceived absence, the ever presence of death has stolen the scene. See further R.K. Johnston, *Useless Beauty: Ecclesiastes through the Lens of Contemporary Film* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2004).

¹⁴⁷¹ The observation of God's works in Qoh 7:13 leads to the awareness that what God has made 'crooked' (**twf**) cannot be made straight or corrected (**qqt**) by humanity.

¹⁴⁷² Perdue, *Wisdom and Creation*, 230.

¹⁴⁷³ Zimmerli, *Old Testament Theology in Outline*, 160. Prov 8:30 might reflect an awareness of *ma'at* as the child of the creator god Atum. Further, in Ps 104:24 and 139:14 wisdom is associated with divine creation, and in Ps 66:3, 92:6, 111:2, 7, 118:17 the works of God are objects of praise. Cf. Murphy, "The Sage," 269.

¹⁴⁷⁴ In Job the relation between wisdom and divine creation is also scrutinised, but wisdom's value is affirmed (Job 28).

¹⁴⁷⁵ Humanity cannot "discover" (**axm**) God's works (Qoh 3:11), but at least they can know that all creation is the work of the same God (Qoh 7:13; 12:1, 7). Compare Isa 45:9 that states the unquestionable nature of the divine works.

perception of God as creator,¹⁴⁷⁶ and the world which operates according to divine decree.

Qohelet's argument concerning the failure of wisdom has ramifications for the perceived divine-human relation. No means remain for securing one's place in creation,¹⁴⁷⁷ or one's place in relation to the creator, and as a result the world has become a volatile place.¹⁴⁷⁸ For this reason the admonishment in 5:2 is not surprising. Indeed, the location of God in heaven (**מְבַרַּךְ**, i.e. "almighty, elevated, intransitory") and humanity on earth (**אֱרָצָה**, i.e. "dependant, insignificant, transitory") does not merely point to a spatial distance (i.e. two cosmological extremes), but also to a differentiation of status.¹⁴⁷⁹ As such the divine-human relation in Qohelet gains a hierarchical quality.¹⁴⁸⁰ While not explicitly stated, the trustworthiness of the creator becomes questionable. Humanity must live with an awareness of the distance between God and creation. It is part of their "share" (**חֵלֶק**) in life.¹⁴⁸¹ Unlike the book of Job, Qohelet contains no theophany to underscore the importance of the divine-human relationship, as is the case in the divine speeches in the book of Job (38-41).¹⁴⁸² God remains disturbingly absent in the world as perceived by Qohelet. This distance cannot be breached by means of human activity. While Qohelet severely scrutinises this distance, the notion of divine involvement in creation is not entirely rejected. As already stated, glimpses of such divine "involvement" are located in life's moments of creation and death, and judgment, as demonstrated in Qoh 11:7-12:8.¹⁴⁸³

4.5.2.1.2 Creator and Creation in Qoh 11:7-12:8

Creation is an important theological theme in Qoh 11:7-12:8, despite the fact that the text does not abound with creation terminology. The importance of creation as a theological theme is indicated by the clustering of ideas relating to creation. This includes the contrast of light and darkness; the reference to God (**אֱלֹהִים**) within the context of judgment (11:9); the reference to God as creator (12:1a), and God as giver and possessor of the **חַיִּים** (12:7). Indeed, in 11:7 life is characterised in positive terms, since light (**אוֹר**) is sweet and it is good for the eyes to see the sun (**שֶׁמֶשׁ**). This positive affirmation of life continues in 11:8a, since many years of life should serve as a reason for joy (**שִׂמְחָה**), particularly since the days of darkness will be many (11:8b), and

¹⁴⁷⁶ Boström, *The God of the Sages*, 178.

¹⁴⁷⁷ Both wisdom and cult loses its potential to provide security in Qohelet. For Qohelet it is no longer certain that wisdom leads to life (contra Prov 12:28; 13:14; 14:27; 11:30), or that the cult offers a means for safeguarding life. Cf. Clements, *Wisdom in Theology*, 80.

¹⁴⁷⁸ Two fundamental assumptions of traditional wisdom, namely that God is moral and the world trustworthy, become obsolete. Cf. Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom*, 125.

¹⁴⁷⁹ Houtman, *Der Himmel*, 231. Job 2:12-13 also reflects this divine-human differentiation, where the friends sprinkle dust (**רָפָה**) on their heads "toward heaven" (**לְמַעַן** v 12) and sit down with Job "on the ground" (**אֶרֶץ** v 13). Cf. also 2 Chron 20:6; Dan 2:28, 18, 47; Ps 123:1; Lam 3:41 where God is qualified as "almighty" by means of **מְבַרַּךְ**. This qualitative location calls to mind the Babylonian sun god *Šamaš*, who by means of his daily journey through the heavens saw all injustice and maintained the social and moral equilibrium on earth. Cf. *ANET* (3d ed.; 1969), 387-389.

¹⁴⁸⁰ The divine-human differentiation is further explicated by the contrast of the infinite nature of God and His works with the finite nature of humanity and their works.

¹⁴⁸¹ Frydrych, *Living Under the Sun*, 125.

¹⁴⁸² Dearman, *Religion and Culture*, 223.

¹⁴⁸³ Whybray, "Qohelet as a Theologian," 246. The notion of God as sole creator, but also as the one who reduces his creation to dust, is rather unique in Qohelet's *Umwelt*.

all that comes is **lbh** (11:8c). In 11:9a-d the **ryb** is advised to make the most of life, keeping in mind God's judgment (11:9e-f). The enjoyment of life is also advocated in 11:10a-b, seeing that the time of youth is fleeting. In 11:7-10 'life' is advocated as opportunity, but the fleeting nature of youthful life is contrasted with the duration of life in the process of deterioration. No value judgment is attributed to creation as such, but rather to different moments in life. Further, Qohelet is here addressing an individual (**ryb**, 11:9a; also 12:1a, with the second singular masculine suffix),¹⁴⁸⁴ though the interest in the book is primarily on humanity in general.¹⁴⁸⁵ The reference to divine judgement (**fpvm**) in 11:9 is detached from the wider context of the imagery, but here applies to the **ryb**. As such it points to divine interest in creation, even if it is from a distance. Thus the dominant view of divine apathy momentarily allows for a notion of divine concern.¹⁴⁸⁶

The elusive nature of the deity in 11:7-12:8 is indicated by the use of the impersonal **pyhlah** (11:9f; 12:7b). As such "your creator" (**uyarv**, ptc. of **arb**) in 12:1a is all the more significant. It presents a unique case in the HB wisdom literature.¹⁴⁸⁷ Here it emphasises the importance of the God as creator theme in Qohelet.¹⁴⁸⁸ It has been suggested that the reference to "your creator" indicates an attempt at bridging the gap between the creator and humanity, establishing a more personal relation.¹⁴⁸⁹ But this argument looses ground in view of Qoh 11:5, where such a personal relation between creator and (individual) creation is thwarted.¹⁴⁹⁰ Life's origin remains a mystery. The argument also looses ground in view of the tension concerning **rkz** in 12:1a (see below). The creator remains elusive, and as such knowledge of the creator does not provide any basic security for humanity.¹⁴⁹¹ While the use of **uyarv** is most probably intentional, it does not establish a more personal divine-human relation.

The creator must be remembered (**rkz**) in the prime of life, given that this moment in life is fleeting. The emphasis on remembering the creator in life is in part due to the knowledge that the possibility for communion with the creator is limited to the time of life. When death sets in, the change has passed. For this reason the argument that the **jw** returns to **pyhlah** who gave it (12:7b) offers no certainty, or reason for hope on

¹⁴⁸⁴ This is a typical formulation in wisdom literature, but presents a shift of focus in Qohelet.

¹⁴⁸⁵ This is evidenced by the abundant use of **uda** (x 49) and the scant use of **va** (x 10). Cf. Schoors, "Words Typical of Qohelet," 17. Also R. Gordis, "Was Kohelet a Phoenician? Some Observations on Methods of Research," *JBL* 74 (1955): 112. In this regard Frydrych, *Living under the Sun*, 161 observes that humanity in Qohelet is not thought of in absolute individualistic terms, but is rather seen as "a single, continuous flow of generations and it is precisely the character of this collective flow that determines the nature of individual human existence."

¹⁴⁸⁶ Qohelet is primarily concerned with how God relates to humanity and not vice versa. Cf. Frydrych, *Living under the Sun*, 199.

¹⁴⁸⁷ In the exilic-postexilic period **arb** became a *terminus technicus* for referring to divine acts of creation. Cf. Schmidt, *Die Schöpfungsgeschichte der Priesterschrift*, 164-167. This is pertinent in the P creation account (Gen 1:1, 21, 27) and Deutero-Isaiah (Isa 40:26, 28; 41:20; 42:5; 43:1, 7, 15; 45:7, 8, 12, 18; 54:16), but in these traditions God is never referred to as creator.

¹⁴⁸⁸ Schubert, *Schöpfungstheologie*, 98.

¹⁴⁸⁹ A.J.O. van der Wal, "Qoheleth 12:1a: A Relatively Unique Statement in Israel's Wisdom Tradition," in: A. Schoors (ed.), *Qoheleth in the Context of Wisdom* (BETL 136; Leuven: Peeters, 1998), 418. He sees 12:1 as in harmony with Isaiah 45:12 and 54:5, pointing to a connection of wisdom and prophecy.

¹⁴⁹⁰ Perdue, *Wisdom and Creation*, 231-232. This tradition is also reflected in Job 10:8-12 and Ps 139:13-16. Also Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 59 who shares this view.

¹⁴⁹¹ Van der Wal, "Qoheleth 12:1a," 418 argues for the notion of a "basic security."

something more after death. In Qoh 11:7-12:8 the theme of God as creator is very clear,¹⁴⁹² but within the broader context of Qohelet, God's works remain precarious within the capacity of human knowledge (**hmkj**), and as such do not provide any security.¹⁴⁹³ For this reason the imperative in Qoh 12:1a should not be interpreted as an indication of Qohelet being a so-called preacher of joy. An awareness of God as creator does not serve to relativise the intense awareness of personal mortality proclaimed in the book of Qohelet. It should be noted that the return of the **jw** to **pyhlah** in 12:7b makes clear that life remains the divine prerogative, despite the event of death.¹⁴⁹⁴ But in view of the absolute nature of death, this knowledge offers little reason for joy.¹⁴⁹⁵

While the creation theology of Qohelet contains no description of a process of divine creation, 11:7-12:8 does contain a description of the process of physical deterioration of the individual created being. This is particularly the case in 12:3-6. The unnatural flow of events in 12:2 is of rhetorical significance because it is unexpected (contra Gen 1:16-17). All the luminaries (sun, moon, stars) and light (**rw**) as such are darkened (12:2a-b), and clouds return immediately after the rain (12:2c). Such an unexpected turn of events contributes to a perception of creation as volatile. This notion of unexpectedness is absent in 12:3-6, and the rhetorical effect of these verses is that the described events are identifiable. At issue is ruin and deterioration, and it applies to the life of each created being. Within the realm of life, the inevitability of death cannot be escaped. In the process of deterioration the creator is quite absent.¹⁴⁹⁶ This results from the perception of deterioration and death as an inherent part of creation, finding its place within the wider frame of Qohelet's creation theology, particularly in the framework of 11:7-12:8, in which God is present.

The description of ruin and deterioration culminates with the description of the death of the individual, which returns to dust (**rp**], 12:7a). In this regard Qohelet shares a wider occurring theme in the HB (e.g. Gen 3:19; Ps 104:29). In 12:7a dust is said to return to the earth (**ʾra**) as it was, indicating the inherent nature of individual beings. Qohelet is recycling a familiar theological motif, but as already stated, also affirms a perceived status differentiation. Unlike 3:20-21, the individual is in focus in 12:7, with no reference to the beast (**hmbb**). But the notion is shared that the basic substance of all created beings is dust, and that all share the same fate, namely death. What is doubtful in 3:21 is presented as certain in 12:7b. But both texts are set within a broader context in which God is presented as creator.

¹⁴⁹² Perdue, *Wisdom and Creation*, 230.

¹⁴⁹³ In the world turned upside down of Qohelet, God, reality and the place of humanity in creation had to be re-thought. Perdue, *Wisdom and Creation*, 238 refers to a "new worldview" operative in Qohelet, and argues that it is by entering into the boundaries of this world, i.e. of creation, that one is offered an alternative way of existence. In this worldview humanity is removed from the centre of creation.

¹⁴⁹⁴ Reading 12:1a and 12:7b together supports the argument that life belongs to the creator, but offers no reason for a positive interpretation. Humanity is powerless in matters of life and death (Qoh 8:8).

¹⁴⁹⁵ In view of Qohelet's cyclical worldview (cf. Qoh 1:4-11), death brings the cycle of life to an inevitable close, i.e. back to naught. As such Qohelet's questioning of humanity's **ṣwty** and **qlj** is understandable, and the claim that all is **lbh** comprehensible.

¹⁴⁹⁶ This notion of deterioration contrasts with Qoh 3:14, that argues for the eternal endurance (**ṣlwʾl**) of that which God has made (**hc**]).

According to Qohelet's creation theology, life is one's God given "share" (**qlj**), and carries the imperative (**jmc**) that life's moments should be utilised, though in a qualified manner (**rkz**). This qualification is particularly significant, given the elusive nature of the deity and the potentially volatile character of creation. But it is within this creation that life, with its moments of joy and remembrance, has to be lived.

4.5.3 Death as a Theological Theme in Qoh 11:7-12:8

While life is to be lived within the context of divine creation and in relation with the creator, the question remains how this life is to be lived in view of the certainty of death. Death for Qohelet presents the distant, though absolute end and the **ryjb** will do well to keep it in mind.¹⁴⁹⁷ Life is the occasion for joy (**jmc**), but also the time to remember (**rkz**), i.e. to consider the character of ones createdness, the relation with the creator, and one's place within creation. The imperatives **jmc** and **rkz** present a tension that is not resolved within the context of 11:7-12:8. But this tension is characteristic of Qohelet's rhetoric, and does not need to be resolved.¹⁴⁹⁸ It is clear however that **jmc** is the leading theme in 11:7-10, while **rkz** is the leading theme in 12:1-8. As a result of this tension, a moment of uncertainty is always present in Qohelet's argumentation, also concerning the theme of death.

In this regard Barth raised the question whether death in Qohelet is "eine Art Naturgesetz, eine vom Schöpfer aus guten Gründen gesetzte, unabänderliche Ordnung? Oder ist er ein irrationales Schicksal, dem wir uns gern oder ungern zu unterwerfen haben?"¹⁴⁹⁹ But in terms of Qohelet's argumentation and the nature of the imagery employed, death is perceivable as the divinely determined natural end of all life, and also as the incomprehensible fate of all, over which neither the wise nor the fool has any control. For this reason Qohelet's rhetoric of death, particularly in Qoh 11:7-12:8, will now be considered.

4.5.3.1 The Wisdom of Qohelet and the Theme of Death

Qohelet seriously scrutinises the basic tenets of proverbial wisdom and in the process debunks the value of wisdom (**hmkj**),¹⁵⁰⁰ as demonstrated in Qoh 7:15.¹⁵⁰¹ Indeed, through personal experience and empiric observation (1:13), Qohelet is aware that

¹⁴⁹⁷ Clements, *Wisdom in Theology*, 91.

¹⁴⁹⁸ E.P. Lee, *The Vitality of Enjoyment in Qohelet's Theological Rhetoric* (BZAW 353; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2005).

¹⁴⁹⁹ For Barth, *Die Errettung*, 159 these two perspectives should be separated, though both are present in the HB.

¹⁵⁰⁰ The critical spirit of Qohelet also occurs in Sirach and Wisdom, though these two texts reaffirm some of the wisdom tenets that Qohelet disputes, particularly the principle of retribution. Qohelet's critical reasoning was well received by the Sadducees, while Sirach and Wisdom's reasoning found further expression in thoughts of the Pharisees. For M.V. Fox, "Wisdom in Qohelet," in: L.G. Perdue et al., *In Search of Wisdom: Essays in Memory of John G. Gammie* (Westminster: John Knox Press, 1993), 122 Qohelet's wisdom is foreign to the context of the ANE, but at home in Qohelet's Hellenistic environment.

¹⁵⁰¹ That the righteous (**qydx**) dies in righteousness and that the wicked (**[vr]**) prolongs life in wickedness presents the ultimate reversal of proverbial wisdom, and this is what Qohelet "observes" (**har**).

ultimate wisdom is a chimera and can never be attained (6:11f).¹⁵⁰² This has implications for his perception and evaluation of death.¹⁵⁰³ From the opening chapter of Qohelet, the different take on wisdom's worth is evident. Solomon as the epitome of a wise person is put to word (1:1), only to debunk the value of wisdom (1:17). For Qohelet this implies wisdom as a rigid, dogmatic system.¹⁵⁰⁴ As such to "seek" (**vrđ**) and "search out" (**rwł**) understanding by means of wisdom is a profitless venture, characterised as **lbh** (1:13, 17).¹⁵⁰⁵ For indeed much wisdom and knowledge merely brings grief and sorrow (1:18). For Qohelet wisdom lost its ability to "steer" or "guide" (**twbjt**, cf. Prov 1:5; 11:14; 12:5; 20:18; 24:6; Job 37:12) the wise through life. As such Qohelet is critical of proverbial wisdom, but does not reject it altogether (2:13; 7:18-19; 8:12).¹⁵⁰⁶ He rather re-thinks its basic postulates and reframes it in terms of his experience.¹⁵⁰⁷

In this way the *Tun-Ergehen-Zusammenhang* is also re-evaluated.¹⁵⁰⁸ This principle is also scrutinised in the book of Job, but Qohelet contains no reaffirmation of its validity as does the book of Job (Job 42:10-17).¹⁵⁰⁹ As such Qohelet verges on the brink of rejecting it.¹⁵¹⁰ But he does not, and maintains the notion of a divinely established order in creation (3:1-8).¹⁵¹¹ However, this order¹⁵¹² as perceived by Qohelet no longer serves as a means of securing one's place in creation, due to wisdom's incapacity to comprehend it (3:11),¹⁵¹³ losing its beneficial quality.¹⁵¹⁴ For

¹⁵⁰² E. Levine, "Qohelet's Fool: A Composite Portrait," in: Y.T. Radday and A. Brenner (eds.), *On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible* (JSOTSup 92; Decatur: Almond Press, 1990), 279.

¹⁵⁰³ According to F.J. Backhaus, "Denn Zeit und Zufall trifft sie alle": *Studien zur Komposition und zum Gottesbild im Buch Qohelet* (BBB 83; Frankfurt: Anton Hain, 1993), 392 death in Qohelet as the fate of all does not present an existential crisis, but rather a crisis concerning the principles of wisdom.

¹⁵⁰⁴ Von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, 70 argued that conflict within wisdom arises when insights considered at one stage as correct become 'dogmatically' hardened. That is, when "experience no longer continues to liberate that which is known and where that which is known is not being constantly re-examined." Or as Schmid, *Gerechtigkeit als Weltordnung*, 165 formulates it, "Sprache und Wirklichkeit decken sich nicht mehr." The result is knowledge that conflicts with the evidence of reality. In this regard Loader, *Polar Structures*, 3, 123 refers to the context bound nature of wisdom sayings, and that these should be brought back to reality, i.e. made applicable for present situations in order to prevent it from becoming a fixed dogmatic system, no longer in touch with reality. The tension between "doctrine" and "protest" is never resolved in Qohelet.

¹⁵⁰⁵ Central to the reasoning of Qohelet is the admittance that knowledge is fragmentary. Cf. Crenshaw, *A Whirlpool of Torment*, 79-80. Qohelet rarely uses terms besides **hmkj** and **t[d]**, with **t[d]** employed as a pendant to **hmkj** and should not be distinguished. The knowledge Qohelet acquires is labelled **hmkj** and **t[d]**, though he also uses **rwvk** "skill" and **twvj** "calculation." Cf. Fox, "Wisdom in Qohelet," 117.

¹⁵⁰⁶ Qohelet's response to the questions that he poses to life, distinguish his reasoning from traditional sages. Cf. W. Zimmerli, *Die Weisheit des Predigers Salomo* (Berlin: Alfred Töpelmann, 1936), 14. The critical potential of traditional wisdom comes to bloom in Qohelet.

¹⁵⁰⁷ Experience is Qohelet's primary epistemological source. Cf. M.V. Fox, "Qohelet's Epistemology." *HUCA* 58 (1987): 137-155. Also Frydrych, *Living Under the Sun*, 69 who regards personal experience as primary *modus operandi* for Qohelet, as is indicated by the frequent use of **har** ("to see"), **dy** ("to know") and **axm** ("to find"). Also Murphy, "The Sage," 268.

¹⁵⁰⁸ Schubert, *Schöpfungstheologie*, 83.

¹⁵⁰⁹ In Qoh 4:1-2 the observation of oppression in life, leads to the dead being valued above the living.

¹⁵¹⁰ Zimmerli, *Die Weisheit des Predigers Salomo*, 14. Wisdom is perceived as better than folly in Qoh 2:13, but this does not imply that wisdom has any profit (cf. 2:14-15).

¹⁵¹¹ Qohelet perceives the world as cyclical and consistent (1:4-7), to the point of being static and unchanging. But change can also occur rapidly. Cf. Frydrych, *Living Under the Sun*, 69, 70-71.

¹⁵¹² For Schmid, *Gerechtigkeit*, 164 this order is signified by the root **qdx** in Israel's wisdom literature.

¹⁵¹³ In Qohelet's view knowledge is fragmentary and the understanding of reality only partial. Cf. Crenshaw, *A Whirlpool of Torment*, 79-80. Qohelet's advice in 5:2 that people's words should be few

this reason one's place in creation can no longer be secured by means of the causality principle.¹⁵¹⁵ This leaves humanity standing helpless in the face of death (8:8), which transcends the bounds of the principle of retribution.¹⁵¹⁶ I.e., death does not discriminate.¹⁵¹⁷ For Qohelet no retribution is expected in the present, and even less after the moment of death.¹⁵¹⁸ In this way the nature of the deity becomes questionable, since the divine character cannot be evaluated in terms of the principle of retribution. This contributes to the theological crisis encountered in Qohelet, particularly in view of the individual's position in relation to the deity.

As a result of this "paradigm shift" regarding wisdom's value, death acquires a different characteristic in Qohelet.¹⁵¹⁹ The creation-death relation becomes debatable,¹⁵²⁰ since death can no longer be "thwarted" by means of wisdom.¹⁵²¹ Death rather marks the end of the wise and fool alike.¹⁵²² This perception of death necessarily has implications for Qohelet's evaluation of life's profit.¹⁵²³ Indeed, Qohelet proclaims his hatred of life (2:17), motivated by his observations.¹⁵²⁴ As such the creation-death relation is characterised by a tension, with no attempt at resolving it. Despite the crisis of wisdom in Qohelet, the two invariables are maintained, namely God as creator and the certainty of death. A tension is also noticeable in the creator-death relation.¹⁵²⁵ While death presents the natural end of all life and an inherent part

undermines the central means of divine-human communication, particularly at a sanctuary. Qohelet does not engage in an argument with God, but directs his arguments to his fellow *homo sapiens*. See also A. Schellenberg, *Erkenntnis als Problem: Qohelet und die alttestamentliche Diskussion um das menschliche Erkennen* (OBO 188; Freiburg: Universitätsverlag, 2002).

¹⁵¹⁴ For Reventlow, "Tod und Leben," 17 "Die unterschiedlose Todesgrenze bringt jedes Begreifen einer gerechten Ordnung in der Welt zum Scheitern."

¹⁵¹⁵ According to Schubert, *Schöpfungstheologie*, 83 **hmkj** in Qohelet does not express an absolute *Erkenntnisprinzip*, but rather a human attribute and ability, by means of which some knowledge of the world is possible, but does not provide any guarantees. As such wisdom is frustrated in its task. Cf. M.V. Fox, "The Inner-Structure of Qohelet's Thought," in: A. Schoors (ed.), *Qohelet in the Context of Wisdom* (BETL 136; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1998), 228.

¹⁵¹⁶ Qohelet departs from proverbial wisdom that evaluates death exclusively in the framework of the *Tun-Ergehen-Zusammenhang*. Cf. Backhaus, *Denn Zeit und Zufall*, 391.

¹⁵¹⁷ The lack of wisdom's distinction, particularly between the wise and the fool, is also seen in Qoh 2:16, 3:9, 18-22; 5:14f; 6:3-6; 8:8; 9:3-6.

¹⁵¹⁸ Carny, *Theodicy in the Book of Qohelet*, 78. Also Reventlow, "Tod und Leben," 17. Further Backhaus, *Denn Zeit und Zufall*, 395; Michel, *Untersuchungen*, 177.

¹⁵¹⁹ Reventlow, "Tod und Leben," 17. It is the *unausweichliche Todesgeschichte* that characterises all considerations of justice and wisdom as vain (cf. Qoh 9:2a).

¹⁵²⁰ Due to the disintegration of the *Tun-Ergehen-Zusammenhang* humanity faces death passively and powerlessly. Cf. Schubert, *Schöpfungstheologie*, 164. For Qohelet, humanity finds itself in a world over which mortals have no control. Cf. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 55.

¹⁵²¹ In contrast to Prov 9:10-11, wisdom is no more a guarantee for longevity and Qohelet does not consider wisdom as a "tree of life" (**עץ חיים**, Prov 3:18). Death is certain, and foolish living will however result in an early death (cf. 7:17; also 3:2).

¹⁵²² Wisdom can no longer secure individual or community existence. Cf. Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom*, 121.

¹⁵²³ Fox, "Wisdom in Qohelet," 125.

¹⁵²⁴ Such hatred of life is also seen in Job 3, but Job's perception of death is ambivalent since he both longs for it and recoils in horror at its prospect. Cf. D.L. Smith, "The Concept of Death in Job and Ecclesiastes." *Didaskalia* 4 (1992): 2-14 at 2.

¹⁵²⁵ In search of meaning in creation Qohelet is constantly confronted with the realisation that "life itself is unfair, that human wisdom is woefully insufficient and that death continually laughed in his face." Cf. B.C. Davis, "Ecclesiastes 12:1-8 – Death, an Impetus for Life." *BS* 148 (1991): 298.

of divine creation,¹⁵²⁶ it also becomes incompatible with divine creation as a result of the failure of wisdom to secure life.¹⁵²⁷ In this sense the certainty of death fills the void left by the collapse of the causality principle in Qohelet.¹⁵²⁸ For this reason the wise person will do well to remain aware of this certainty within the context of life.¹⁵²⁹

4.5.3.2 The Rhetoric of Death in Qohelet

While death in Qohelet offers a hermeneutical key for making sense of life in the present, the actual nature of Qohelet's rhetoric of death remains disputable.¹⁵³⁰ The centrality of death as a theological theme in Qohelet might seem exaggerated if the frequency of terms relating to death is considered,¹⁵³¹ since it does not point to an obsession with death. But Qohelet's rhetoric of death is not limited to the use of the root **twm**. He employs as well as deviates from traditional conceptions of death in the HB.¹⁵³²

Qohelet 3 provides insight into the world as perceived by the Preacher. In a rather rhythmic fashion this text (3:1) proclaims the divinely appointed time for everything under the heaven (**Apj Alkl t[wanz lkl**),¹⁵³³ including the time of birth (**dly**) and time of death (**twm**), which are put on par in a factual way in 3:2. In this text death is not placed in a specific category, i.e. in opposition to divine creation or as a threat to creation.¹⁵³⁴ Both moments fit within the frame of divine creation. But while the "time to die" (**twm t[**)¹⁵³⁵ is stated in a factual manner (3:2), the fate of the spirit (**jw**) at the moment of death remains uncertain ([**dyym** 3:21; contra 12:7 where the fate of the **jw**

¹⁵²⁶ Backhaus, *Denn Zeit und Zufall*, 391 points to the perception of death in later wisdom as *geschöpfliche Tod*, i.e. as part of the natural order of creation, while earlier proverbial wisdom perceived death as *selbstverschuldeten Tod*, i.e. as the result of foolish living. But this distinction is not as clear cut.

¹⁵²⁷ The devaluation of wisdom implies that the boundary of death can no longer be influenced (e.g. Prov 10:27, where an early death is avoidable by means of wise living). Cf. Schubert, *Schöpfungstheologie*, 167.

¹⁵²⁸ Backhaus, *Denn Zeit und Zufall*, 393. He argues that in Qohelet death replaces the *Ordnungsstrukturen* of traditional wisdom and becomes "der zentrale anthropologischen Konstante." This leads to a different understanding of life under the sun as exemplified in 9:11. The same "time and chance" (**[gpwt]**) happens to all. As such death presents a hermeneutical key for comprehending reality. Also Klein, *Kohelet*, 158; Burkes, *God, Self and Death*, 76.

¹⁵²⁹ Given the experienced-based nature of Qohelet's wisdom, birth and death constitute the basic boundaries in which Qohelet's wisdom applies. Cf. Frydrych, *Living under the Sun*, 48. For this reason Qohelet's disinterest in that which falls outside these boundaries, such as the fate of the dead, is comprehensible. The ideal to achieve a lasting benefit from life that extends beyond the point of death becomes obsolete.

¹⁵³⁰ For Backhaus, *Denn Zeit und Zufall*, 390-398 the theme of death in Qohelet provides a hermeneutical key for its interpretation.

¹⁵³¹ As verb **twm** occurs in 2:16; 3:2, 19; 4:2; 7:17; 9:4, 5 and as noun in 7:1, 26; 8:8; 10:1.

¹⁵³² Murphy, "The Sage," 268. Qohelet's dealing with death and Sheol presents one of the clearest examples of how he agrees and disagrees with traditional religious ideas.

¹⁵³³ Here **anz** refers to a specific time, while **t[** indicates a more general time, though it is specified by **Apj** "purpose, business" and elaborated in 3:2-8, with the theme recurring in 3:17.

¹⁵³⁴ Death for Qohelet is an inevitable consequence of what humans, indeed all created beings are, and not judged as something coming from without, i.e. as unnatural.

¹⁵³⁵ In Qoh 3:1-8 "death / dying" (**twm**) is the only event or action not under human control (compared with e.g. "a time to build up" and "a time to tear down" etc.).

is quite certain). What is certain is that the “sons of man” (**ṣdāhʾyb**) share the same fate (**hrqm**)¹⁵³⁶ as the “beasts” (**hnhb**), namely death (cf. Ps 49:13, MT), since they have the same breath (**jw**, 3:19). Here death as such is not presented as a problem, but rather the fate of the **jw**. What is also particular to this text is the indiscriminate nature of death, seeing that humanity has no “advantage” (**rtw**) over beasts. Humankind cannot even be considered as a rational animal. All created beings go to one place (**ṣwqm** 3:20)¹⁵³⁷ at the moment of death (cf. 6:6, referring to humans only), returning to dust (**rp**).¹⁵³⁸ Here death is also thought of in spatial terms, as part of divine creation. In Qoh 3:19-21 the **jw** is not directly related to **pyhl a**, other than 12:7. But the “upward” (**hl**) and “downward” (**dry**) movement of the **jw** points to a spatial awareness, with God above (i.e. the heavens) and the dead below (**ʾāra**, here as a reference to Sheol). The argument concerning the fate of the **jw** introduces a new line of thinking into an already existing tradition. Significantly, no negative evaluation of death is encountered in this context. Death is rather viewed in terms of the failure of wisdom and the limited nature of human knowledge.

In other contexts in Qohelet death does receive a qualitative evaluation. In 5:15 death is attributed an annihilating function, bringing an end to all human labour and efforts, while in 9:5 death wipes out the memory of the deceased (contra 7:1a, for a good name is useless without remembrance), with no possibility of a continued shade-like existence in Sheol.¹⁵³⁹ This indiscriminate characteristic of death, annihilating the distinction between the wise and fool,¹⁵⁴⁰ stands in contrast with the tenets of proverbial wisdom. According to proverbial wisdom the memory of the wise (**qydx**) will continue to live (litt. “be blessed,” **hkrbl**), while the name of the fool (**[vr]**) will be wiped out (litt “rot,” **bqr**. Cf. Prov 10:7; Ps 112:6). But this failure of the living to remember is lamented in Qohelet (cf. 2:16; 9:4-5, 10).¹⁵⁴¹ Death brings an absolute end to the wise and the fool alike (Qoh 2:16a; 1:11).¹⁵⁴² Despite moments in Qohelet where life is valued above death (cf. 9:4-5, “a living dog is better than a dead lion”),¹⁵⁴³ the finality of death still overshadows the value of life (cf. 2:17; 4:1-3; 6:3-

¹⁵³⁶ Only in 2:14f; 3:19 and 9:2f is **hrqm** used with the meaning “fate” or “fortune.” In Ps 49: 12, 20 humanity is also compared with beasts, sharing the same fate, namely death.

¹⁵³⁷ Here **lww**, occurring only in Qoh 9:10, is implied in view of the “return to dust” (**rp**). Qohelet shares a basic tripartite worldview, including the spheres of the divine, the living and the dead. Cf. Frydrych, *Living Under the Sun*, 107. The sphere of the living is Qohelet’s primary focus, with God located in the heavens (5:2). In 9:10 **lww** does not merely indicate location, but also has a poetic function, describing Sheol as a place of non-existence. Cf. Frydrych, *Living Under the Sun*, 113. For Qohelet, Sheol becomes the epitome of non-life. Cf. Murhpy, “The Sage,” 268.

¹⁵³⁸ Unlike the J and P creation accounts, humanity in Qohelet does not enjoy a distinguished position in creation. The “return to dust” theme does agree with J creation theology (cf. Gen 3:19).

¹⁵³⁹ Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Nicht im Menschen*, 198 regards the presentation of death in Qoh 9:5-6 as a radical interruption of earthly existence. But death is not so much an interruption as it is final.

¹⁵⁴⁰ Cf. Prov 10:27; 12:28; 13:3, 9; 15:24; 22:22-23; 24:19-20 for this distinction between the good death of the wise in old age, and the bad death of the foolish which is premature.

¹⁵⁴¹ The lack of remembrance is another departure from proverbial wisdom. According to J.G. Gammie, “Stoicism and Anti-Stoicism in Qoheleth.” *HAR* 9 (1985): 169-87 Qohelet is here in a dialogue with Stoicism and his denial of remembrance after death is made in opposition to Stoic optimism.

¹⁵⁴² Indiscriminate death is the final injustice for Qohelet. Cf. Burkes, *Death in Qohelet and the Egyptian Biographies*, 80; Burkes, *God, Self and Death*, 80. Also Spangenberg, “Die Prediker se Uitsprake,” 34.

¹⁵⁴³ But what kind of life is a dog’s life, and what is the profit of knowing that you will die? Cf. Spangenberg, “Die Prediker se Uitsprake,” 35.

4; 7:1b, judging the day of death better than the day of birth).¹⁵⁴⁴ As such these positive moments should not be interpreted as an attempt to qualify Qohelet's argument concerning the finality of death.

In 9:10 the nothingness associated with **לוא** is described. In Qoh 4:2 death is viewed as redemptive or liberating (Qoh 4:2), while in Qoh 6:3 death is evaluated as both a positive (natural end of a long life) and negative (no proper burial) event.¹⁵⁴⁵ Such variety in Qohelet's evaluation of death complicates attempts at grasping the Preachers rhetoric.¹⁵⁴⁶ A consequence of this at times contradicting variation is that it becomes impossible to distinguish between a "good" and a "bad" death. This is primarily related to the devaluation of wisdom's value, and the nature of the creator-creation relation. As such humanity is subjected to death's indiscriminate dealings. Qohelet's varied rhetoric also prevents a perception of death as erratic event, since it is located within the parameters of divine creation (Qoh 3:2-8). This brings into focus the creator-death relation, which will be considered in §4.5.3.3.

While death is certain and absolute, some scholars regard Qohelet as entertaining a positive notion of the afterlife.¹⁵⁴⁷ However, it has rightly been pointed out that "non-life" in Qohelet should not be equated with "afterlife."¹⁵⁴⁸ Death for Qohelet brings only non-life, with no possibility of an afterlife. In Qohelet all paths of reasoning resolutely lead to the conclusion that death is final and that all distinctions in life fail in the event of death. Qohelet's pondering on life's brevity and death's absoluteness concerns the present and speculation over that which is unknowable, including that which lies beyond the grave, is not a concern of Qohelet (3:22, 6:12, 8:7).¹⁵⁴⁹ For this reason the notion of judgement¹⁵⁵⁰ or vindication after death is lacking in Qohelet.¹⁵⁵¹ What matters is life in the present and the impact of death in this life.

¹⁵⁴⁴ By means of the return to the earth, "death restores the initial status quo and closes the profitless circle of existence." Cf. Frydrych, *Living under the Sun*, 149, 160. Death closes the cycle of birth and as such Qohelet's circular perception of life differs from the linear view of proverbial wisdom. In Qohelet death brings all forms of continuity to an absolute end. Cf. Burkes, *God, Self and Death*, 82.

¹⁵⁴⁵ Frydrych, *Living under the Sun*, 122.

¹⁵⁴⁶ Ambiguities in Qohelet's reasoning result from Qohelet's observation of ambiguities in creation and are not necessarily indicative of Qohelet contradicting himself. Cf. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 3. The argument of Frydrych, *Living under the Sun*, 155 is suggestive, namely that Qohelet argues on two levels. The first is more abstract and all-encompassing posing general existential questions, while the second is more concrete, dealing with the here and now. On the first level life is regarded as a process of dying without any profit, and on the second level life is characterised by its better and worse moments. The better moments should be exploited, despite its lack of lasting worth. See also H.P. Müller, "Religious Identity and the Invention of Tradition," in: J.W. Van Henten and A. Houtepen (eds.), *Religious Identity and the Invention of Tradition: Papers Read at a Noster Conference in Soesterberg* (Assen: van Gorcum, 2001), 156-168 at 165. He proposes that Qohelet employs a "conceptual interpretation of reality," presenting the beginning of Jewish philosophy.

¹⁵⁴⁷ Cf. G.S. Ogden, *Qoheleth* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987), 15, 25; D.A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs* (NAC 14; Nashville: Broadman Press, 1993), 304-305.

¹⁵⁴⁸ Murphy, "Death and Afterlife in the Wisdom Literature," 109.

¹⁵⁴⁹ Murphy, "The Sage," 269. Qohelet's disinterest with that which follows the grave may be considered in terms of his socio-historical context, given that he wrote in a pre-persecution period.

¹⁵⁵⁰ Qoh 11:9f and 3:17 refers to divine judgment, but this is expected in life. It contrasts with human justice (**fpvnh pwn**) that has become corrupt (cf. 3:16).

¹⁵⁵¹ Possible references to post-mortem vindication in Qoh 8:12-14; 11:9b; 12:14 are mostly attributed to redactional labour and do not provide a sufficient textual basis for postulating some kind of eschatological expectation in Qohelet.

4.5.3.3 God and Qohelet's Rhetoric of Death

In Qohelet death is final and absolute, but this does not necessarily imply that life as such is absolutely meaningless.¹⁵⁵² Rather, the greatest foolishness of all for Qohelet is to waste life (9:7f).¹⁵⁵³ For life under the sun is humanity's divinely allotted share (**qlj**, 5:18; also 8:15; 9:9). But in view of Qoh 1:3 (**vmvh tjt...pda** **artyhm**) or 6:12 (**pda** **bfAhm** [**dyAmk**]) the exact nature of this "share" is unsure. In part the perceived creator-death relation contributes to the comprehension of humankind's share in life. In Qohelet the divine-human relation is typified in 5:2, stressing the distance between God and humankind. The addressee must remain aware of this distance, since it is also indicative of a status differentiation, with God ruling from his heavenly abode and humankind little more than dust. As such God can destroy (**lbj**, Pi) human works (**hc[m** 5:5, HB). The sovereignty of **pyhla** over human life is further demonstrated in 12:7, where He is described as the giver and re-possessor of life.¹⁵⁵⁴ Qohelet stresses God's sovereignty over life, but leaves the nature of the divine-death relation open for debate.

While God is responsible for an ordered creation that includes the time to die (3:2), God is never explicitly accredited with causing death.¹⁵⁵⁵ Since death fits within the frame of divine creation and given that life remains in possession of **pyhla**, death in relation to the deity should not be evaluated as a random event. Death annihilates, it brings to nought, and interrupts life, but it does not fall outside the divine reach.¹⁵⁵⁶ In this regard the divine-death relation is contrasted with the human-death relation. This is exemplified in 8:8, stating that humanity (**pda**) has no mastery (**fyv**) over the **jw**, and that they cannot retain (**alk**) it, and neither do they have power (**aflyv**) on the day of death (**twh pyb**). They also have no power over their 'appointed time' (Qoh 9:11-12). These statements of Qohelet reaffirm the notion of human incapacity in the face of death but also reaffirm the distinction between God and humanity in matters concerning life and death. That death falls under divine jurisdiction is a different way of stating that it fits within the parameters of divine creation, pointing to the intricate connection between God and death.¹⁵⁵⁷

¹⁵⁵² Qohelet never expresses a wish to die as in Job 3, and never considers suicide as in the Egyptian *Dispute over Suicide* from the Middle Kingdom (end 3d millennium BCE), where the lamenter is in dialogue with his own soul, pondering on the merit of suicide. Cf. *ANET* (3d ed.; 1969), 405-407. J. Blenkinsopp, "Ecclesiastes 3:1-15: Another Interpretation." *JSOT* 66 (1995): 57 suggests translating the infinitive **twl** in 3:2 as "take one's own life," i.e. to put a timely end to one's life. He suggests this translation in view of the Stoic notion of "timely action" (**eukairia**). He also associates 7:1 with popular Hellenistic philosophy. But such a reading of **twl** is too speculative and not required by its context.

¹⁵⁵³ Levine, "Qohelet's Fool," 292.

¹⁵⁵⁴ In Job 9:22 God is accredited with bringing both the wicked and the righteous to the same end, namely "destruction" (**hlk**). Death is the fate of the wise and fool in Qohelet, but it is not directly related to God.

¹⁵⁵⁵ Death might result from God's judging (**fpv**) the righteous and the wicked (3:17).

¹⁵⁵⁶ In the Second Temple period, death became associated with complete disappearance. Cf. Sacchi, *The History of the Second Temple Period*, 428. As such "Sheol becomes the literary synonym for death and the idea of the nothingness of death becomes more and more clear, reaching Qohelet's lucid meditations on death."

¹⁵⁵⁷ As already stated, the HB remains silent on the origin of death, with God nowhere explicitly said to have made it. But those instances where God is accredited with bringing about death indicate divine jurisdiction over death.

For Qohelet **pyhla** reigns supreme in matters concerning life and death, but the relation of the deity with the dead and Sheol is less clear. Indeed, Qohelet remains strikingly silent on this matter. This results from the fact that for Qohelet death marks the absolute end of life, without any hope of a shade-like continuance after death or future life.¹⁵⁵⁸ Whatever life there is to be lived must be lived *Diesseits*, for in **lww** there is nothing (9:10). As such a concern with what happens after death, or the relation of God and the dead is unnecessary, or at least out of place within the framework of Qohelet's rhetoric. While God is not accredited with bringing about death, it remains a question to what extent God punishes the wicked or the perverter of justice (3:17; 5:8; 8:11). While this is hinted at, the implication is that it has to take place within the context of this life. In terms of Qohelet's observation this is ambiguous, given that all share the same fate, the wise dying as the fool (2:16). Human life is characterised by madness (**twlwh**), from which death follows without judgment (9:3).¹⁵⁵⁹ But for this God is not held responsible (7:29). God's relation with the dead is very vague in Qohelet, but death is not excluded from Qohelet's experience of God or creation, it is coloured by it.

4.5.3.4 Death as a Theological Theme in Qohelet 11:7-12:8

The theme of death permeates the book of Qohelet in various ways, and finds its most acute expression in 11:7-12:8.¹⁵⁶⁰ In this literary unit life and death are theologically weighed against each other within the context of creation. As such the life-death relation is characterised by a tension, with no attempt to resolve it.¹⁵⁶¹ As stated in §4.2, this tension revolves around the imperatives "rejoice" (**jmc**, 7:8a, 9) and "remember" (**rkz**, 7:8b, 12:1a).

In the analysis of the text (§4.4) the imperative **rkz** ("to remember") was considered, and the question was raised in how far it functions as a *Totengedenken*.¹⁵⁶² Here it is argued that a connection can indeed be established between **rkz** and the theme of death. The imperative **rkz** in 11:8b relates to the "days of darkness" (**ûvjh myta**) which will be many, while in 12:1a it relates to "your creator" (**ûyarwb**), who must be remembered before the "evil days" (**h[rh my]**) come. In these two contexts "days of darkness" and "evil days" have a similar ambiguous function, indicating either the time spend in death, or the days of physical deterioration on the way toward death.¹⁵⁶³ The "days of darkness" in 11:8 are qualified, for they will be many (**why hbrhAyk**). In view of Qohelet's otherwise careful statements, this definite qualification is

¹⁵⁵⁸ Life under the sun is already perceived by Qohelet as a "shadow" (**lx**, 6:11). In 8:13 this description of life is limited to the wicked person, who does not fear (**ary**) God. See also Ps 90:3-10 for this notion of the fleeting nature of human existence.

¹⁵⁵⁹ See also 1:17; 2:12; 7:25; 10:13 for references to **twlwh**. In Deut 28:28 and Zech 12:4 YHWH smites the horse rider with "madness," **wtgy**.

¹⁵⁶⁰ Schubert, *Schöpfungstheologie*, 98.

¹⁵⁶¹ Cf. Loader, *Polar Structures*, 1. Also Whybray, "Qohelet as a Theologian," 247. This tension does not have to be explained away by means of a psychological explanation of Qohelet's argumentation. Cf. F. Zimmermann, *The Inner World of Qohelet* (New York: KTAV, 1973); Anderson, *Qohelet and His Pessimistic Theology*, 73.

¹⁵⁶² Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Nicht im Menschen*, 199 identifies such a use of **rkz**. For **rkz** as verb cf. 5:19, 9:15, 11:8 and 12:1 and 9:5 as noun ("remembrance").

¹⁵⁶³ Death in Qohelet implies annihilation (9:10) and a process of weakening (12:1-6).

significant. If it refers to many days of physical deterioration on the way towards death, such certainty is impossible in terms of Qohelet's reasoning. If it applies to the time spent in death, it contradicts Qohelet's general disinterest in that which lies beyond the grave. But this reference to the "days of darkness" that will be many might be another way of stating death's absoluteness, from which there is no return.¹⁵⁶⁴ In this way **rkz** in 11:8 is related to the theme of death.¹⁵⁶⁵ Here the "days of darkness" gain a negative connotation, providing a background for the call to rejoice (**jmc**) in the many years of life.

In case of 12:1a **rkz** is related to the theme of death in two ways. Remembrance of one's creator implies remembrance of one's status as being created and by implication being mortal. Thus, remembering your creator implies remembering that you must die. This remembrance should take place in life *Diesseits*, since no remembrance is possible in Sheol (9:5). Secondly, the "evil days" of 12:1b refer to that which follows after death. But this interpretation is less likely, since the "evil days," in tandem with the years (**pyv**) in which the addressee (**ryjb**) of 11:9 is said to have no pleasure in 12:1f (**Åpj mhb yAya**), refer to the process of deterioration so vividly described in 12:3-6. While more indirect, **rkz** in this way relates to the theme of death. The time of life, youth and vigour should be informed by the certainty of death, which reaches into the sphere of life, as evidenced by the process of physical deterioration.

While the status of 12:2 in the context of 11:7-12:8 is rather vague, it relates to the theme of death, depicting a reversal (compared with Gen 1:1-2:4a). It concerns a reversal in the cosmic (**vmv**, **rwa**, **jry**, **pybkw**, **pyb**) rather than the human sphere. In this way it presents a prelude to the description of deterioration and destruction in 12:3-6. That which is associated with light and life is darkened (**ûvj**), and clouds which are usually received positively, are a cause for vexation due to its sudden return (12:2c), blocking out light. But 12:2 can also be regarded as a continuation of the theme of the "days of darkness" in 11:8 and the "evil days" in 12:1b. This furthers the notion that death brings order and existence to an absolute end. Death is indeed characterised by a reversal of that experienced or at least expected in life. For this reason 12:2 is to be interpreted within the context of approaching death, rather than an eschatological event, given that eschatology is not a theme in Qohelet.

The imagery in 12:3-6 can be interpreted as literal ("ruined house") or allegorical ("human body"), and in both instances the themes of deterioration and ruin, as a result of destruction or aging, is at issue. Death is at issue in these verses, as is clearly reflected in 12:5e-f, with man (**mda**) going to his eternal home (**plv tyb**, see also Ps 49:11) and the mourners (**pydps**) going about in the streets.¹⁵⁶⁶ It is very likely that a funeral procession is being described.¹⁵⁶⁷ In 12:6 that which is normally considered as light ("lamp," 12:6a-b) or life ("well," 12:6c-d) giving¹⁵⁶⁸ is presented in the context

¹⁵⁶⁴ In the Egyptian *Instruction of Ptah-Hotep* the setting in of old age is also lamented, and we read, "What old age does to men is evil in every respect." *ANET* (3d ed.; 1969), 412.

¹⁵⁶⁵ The "days of darkness" in 11:8 are opposed to the light (**rwa**) of 11:7, indicative of life.

¹⁵⁶⁶ This description reflects a mourning custom, but the going about of the mourners in the street also suggests the loss of hope brought about by death (Qoh 9:4; Prov 25:2). Cf. Crenshaw, "The Shadow of Death," 209-211.

¹⁵⁶⁷ Fox, *Qohelet and His Contradictions*, 302.

¹⁵⁶⁸ In this respect Sacchi, *The History of the Second Temple Period*, 429 identifies a parallel between Qohelet's view of death and that of the Book of Watchers, in which death is no longer considered part

of destruction. The theme of death is further highlighted by the use of **rb** in 12:6d, which can also refer to the “grave.”¹⁵⁶⁹ Here preference is given to a reading of **rb** as part of the imagery of destruction, in the sense that the well no longer serves as a life-giving source.

The inevitable end of such deterioration already touched upon in 12:5e-f, is described in clear terms in 12:7. With death the dust (**rp**) returns to the earth (**ʾra**, 12:7a).¹⁵⁷⁰ This implies that humans return to the basic substance from which they were created (cf. Gen 2:7; 3:19; Ps 104:29). Indeed, this “being dust” characterises humans in life. Further, the spirit (**jw**) returns to God (**pyhla**) who gave it (12:7b). Life remains the possession of God. The return to dust could however point in the direction of a separation that takes place at the moment of death. Death separates from God, since nothing remains after death. That the **jw** returns to God does not indicate continued existence, but rather the divine sovereignty over life.¹⁵⁷¹ In this return of the **jw** to God, the deity is not said to have an active role in bringing about this return. God is not the instigator of this return, but rather the rightful recipient.¹⁵⁷² Death as such is here dealt with in a matter of fact way, but the peculiar imagery employed prevents any hopeful interpretation. In this context the return of the **jw** to God offers no reason to hope for something more after death. It rather contributes to Qohelet’s cry in 12:8, that all is **lhh**.¹⁵⁷³ Since death brings all hope to an end, Qohelet looks on life with despair, if not at times disgust. Indeed, death robs life of its significance. Since death is certain, it is also lamentable.¹⁵⁷⁴

One should remain aware that Qohelet has a specific addressee in mind in 11:7-12:8, namely the **ryb** (11:9a; 12:1a; the more general **pdah** is employed in Qoh 11:8). This presents a rhetorical convention, and for this reason a loosening of the individual from the larger community should not be identified in 11:7-12:8. The individual still finds its place within the larger contexts of creation.¹⁵⁷⁵ But within this larger context the individual becomes nullified as a result of the general process of degeneration that brings all life to an end.¹⁵⁷⁶ In addressing the **ryb**, Qohelet is contrasting two phases

of natural process, but rather as an extraneous force to human nature, which is derived from a distortion of the cosmic order. Sacchi regards Qohelet’s polemical stance as an indication that the ideas in the Book of Watchers were spreading and that by the 3d century BCE the problem of death existed.

¹⁵⁶⁹ This is the only occurrence of **rb** in Qohelet, and here presents an intentional ambiguity.

¹⁵⁷⁰ Here **ʾra** and Sheol should not be equated too easily. An identification of Sheol does not add to the argument of Qohelet, which rather stresses the absolute end of life announced by the moment of death. The return of the dust to the earth “as it was” (**hyhvk**) supports the notion that death nullifies all human efforts, rendering their profit (**arty**) and share (**qlj**) in life incomprehensible.

¹⁵⁷¹ As such 12:7 does not contradict 3:19-21.

¹⁵⁷² In Job 9:18 God refuses to “take away” (**tn**) Job’s **jw** and instead fills him with “bitterness” (**rrm**).

¹⁵⁷³ In view of death’s certainty, life’s uncertainties become clear. Cf. Krüger, *Kohelet*, 345.

¹⁵⁷⁴ For Michel, *Untersuchungen*, 126-183 Qohelet presents a polemic against an early Jewish apocalyptic stream. If there is nothing beyond death, no justice, no resurrection, what hope could such apocalyptic thinking possibly provide? Quite differently Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 56 argues for a connection between eschatology and death in Qohelet.

¹⁵⁷⁵ Carny, “Theodicy in the Book of Qohelet,” 79. Death’s finality in Qohelet motivates the call for enjoyment (**jnc**), while death in the later wisdom of Sirach serves as a motivation to keep God’s commandments. Cf. Backhaus, *Denn Zeit und Zufall*, 396.

¹⁵⁷⁶ In terms of Qohelet’s rhetoric of death, distinctions that contribute to individual significance also become obsolete. Cf. Fox, “Wisdom in Qohelet,” 125. Also Whybray, “Qohelet as a Theologian,” 252; Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom*, 119.

¹⁵⁷⁷ Schubert, *Schöpfungstheologie*, 163.

in life. Significantly the time of youth, despite being characterised as **lbh** in 11:10, is preferred to the time of old age. As such Qohelet's argument presents an antithesis to proverbial wisdom, in which the time of old age is ascribed a positive value.¹⁵⁷⁷ For Qohelet the time of youth is fleeting, while the time of old age is not wishful. As a result, life in all its phases is characterised as **lbh**. As such death in 11:7-12:8 gains a negative connotation.¹⁵⁷⁸ While an inherent aspect of divine creation and human life, it is also a meaningless event.¹⁵⁷⁹ Death presents a threat to the meaningfulness of life. For this reason death comes to stand in opposition to life. In this oppositional relation, death serves as motivation for ceasing the opportunity of life.¹⁵⁸⁰

4.6 Conclusion

The realistic awareness of death's finality shapes the content and course of Qohelet's rhetoric, finding its most acute formulation in 11:7-12:8. For Qohelet, death presents the point of departure and motivation for his counsel to enjoy life (**hmc**).¹⁵⁸¹ In terms of Qohelet's considerations of life and death in the context of creation, it does present a distinct theological voice in the HB.¹⁵⁸² It is not distinct due to its detachment from Israelite religious tradition, but rather due to the way it engages with this religious tradition and its reapplication thereof in a new way. It is not so much the phenomenon of death that presents a theological problem for Qohelet, but rather its relation to life and its place within divine creation. Death detracts from life, robbing human efforts of its profit (**arty**).¹⁵⁸³ In view of the devaluation of wisdom, this question concerning the profit of **pda** becomes acute, but so also humanity's place in creation and relation with the creator. This leads to the perception that death does not distinguish, that it separates and that it marks the absolute end of life. As such Qohelet contains no root of immortality, or a notion that life, even an enfeebled form of life in Sheol, continues to exist after death.

Leaving aside the double epilogue of Qoh 12:9-14,¹⁵⁸⁴ certainly resulting from a later redactional hand, Qohelet's argument ends with a cry of dismay in 12:8, namely that

¹⁵⁷⁷ Murphy, "Death and Afterlife in Wisdom Literature," 103-104. In Proverbs a negative view of the afterlife occurs and is related to the foolish and wicked. This is absent in Qohelet.

¹⁵⁷⁸ Day, "The Development of Life After Death in Ancient Israel," 251. Qohelet's negativity exceeds that of Job.

¹⁵⁷⁹ E. Levine, *The Aramaic Version of Qohelet* (New York: Sepher-Hermon Press, 1978), 81-82 points to the Targum of Qohelet that contradicts this view concerning the finality and uselessness of death, since death is valued as providing an opportunity for moral recompose. The Targum of Qohelet did not attempt to refute Qohelet's experiential observations, but rather followed Pharasaic Rabbinic Theology according to which the world is morally governed, with the possibility of justice after death. Pharisaic Judaism could not accept Qohelet's view of death and the absurdity of life without the necessary qualification.

¹⁵⁸⁰ In contrast to Proverbs and Job, "Qohelet's view is not that life is lived out as part of the order of creation, as part of a larger theological and philosophical system based on creation and the hopefulness that comes from discerning that order. Rather, Qohelet's views are predicated on the fundamental reality of death and the idea that, wise or foolish, death comes to all; therefore life must begin from an awareness and acceptance of that reality. Death is the beginning of life in Qohelet, and it is death and not creation or providence, that frames and founds reality." Cf. George, "Death as the Beginning of Life," 282.

¹⁵⁸¹ George, "Death as the Beginning of Life," 290.

¹⁵⁸² Carny, "Theodicy in the Book of Qohelet," 79. Qohelet is the only book in the HB that "unmistakably states the finiteness of man and postulates it as an axiom."

¹⁵⁸³ What profit (**arty**) there is should be found in this life, which is humity's share (**qlj**).

¹⁵⁸⁴ Qoh 12:9-14 is an attempt at stifling Qohelet's critical voice and reestablishing wisdom's worth.

all is vanity (**lhh lkh**). This is the dominant tone of the book, but Qohelet does recognise life's better moments (Qoh 3:4), which are part of humanity's share (**qlj**). But as we have argued, the positive statements in Qohelet stressing the value of life should be interpreted against the background of Qohelet's rhetoric of death and not vice versa.¹⁵⁸⁵ Life is defined in terms of death's certainty. It is the certainty of death that prompts Qohelet's calls to enjoyment (**jnc**) of life.¹⁵⁸⁶ This is not the central theme of the book, or of 11:7-12:8.¹⁵⁸⁷ Death overshadows even the fleeting moments of joy experienced in life.¹⁵⁸⁸

Qohelet argues against a life that does not take death serious, i.e. that secretly tries to lengthen existence *ins Jenseits* and in the process devalues earthly *Dasein*.¹⁵⁸⁹ It is this life that matters and one should profit from one's share (**qlj**) in this life, for nothing more is to be expected after death. As such Qohelet does not allow a flight from the realities of this life into a next. Procrastination with the hope of something better to come is thoroughly rejected. Such a perception of life and death is characteristic of Qohelet, but also presents a legitimate voice in the HB. The emphasis Qohelet places on life in the present implies that it stands in opposition to biblical material with a theology based on eschatology. Ultimately, life under the sun, for Qohelet, implies living in the shadow of death.¹⁵⁹⁰

¹⁵⁸⁵ Murphy, "The Sage," 271. The imperatives to enjoy life (2:24-25, 3:12-13, 22, 5:17-19, 8:15, 9:7-10, 11:9) should be considered in its immediate context, since the theme of enjoyment is modified by Qohelet's view death and the incomprehensible nature of the divine will. Also Whybray, "Qohelet, Preacher of Joy," 87, 92-93. In his view the instances in Qohelet stating the woes and vanities of life (Qoh 1:12-2:26, 3:1-15, 3:16-22, 5:9-19, 8:10-15, 9:1-10, 11:7-12:7) provide support for Qohelet's positive (**jnc**) sayings (Qoh 2:24a, 3:12, 3:22a, 5:17, 8:15a, 9:7-9a, 11:7-12:1a). The negative sayings provide a background against which the calls to enjoyment should be read, at time ironically.

¹⁵⁸⁶ Murphy, *The Tree of Life*, 54. Life's positive moments are continuously qualified in light of the negative moments. This emphasises that life is to be lived to the fullest before absolute inertia sets in with death.

¹⁵⁸⁷ Contra Gordis, *Koheleth*, 121-22,. That Qohelet was read in the synagogue on the Feast of Tabernacles as well as the Season of Rejoicing indicates for Gordis how the book was understood by early Jewish religious authorities. "Joy" is a central theme in Qohelet in as far as he continuously sought for it, but without success. In lamenting his ignorance, the negative tones are dominant.

¹⁵⁸⁸ In view of 3:21 (no worthwhile afterlife) and 9:10 (state of the dead in Sheol), Qohelet's argument corresponds to the basic teaching of the HB. Cf. Whybray, "Qoheleth as a Theologian," 246. Yet, Qohelet gives existing tradition a critical and at times negative evaluation.

¹⁵⁸⁹ Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Nicht im Menschen*, 199.

¹⁵⁹⁰ In Qoh 11:7-12:8 the notion of one's **qlj** as limited to this life fits in the parameters of the **jnc** admonition, and it is against this background that the **rkz** admonition should be understood.